IN ALL BUT NAME

a Doctor Who fanzine

REFRACTED LIVES

Veratis ante omnia

It's the fall of 3598. The University of Vremnya is looking to expand its collection of resources for a course on the life of one Bernice Summerfield, famous archaeologist-adventurer and alumni of its Archaeology department...

Do you like Benny? Then get hyped for the second issue of the Bernice Summerfield zine *Refracted Lives*! The focus, this time, is on the Dellah/Collection eras and an academic angle on the life of Benny & co.

Can't wait for Benny Zine #2 to release? Why not check out the first issue!

bennyzine refractedlives

art by **IVQKS159**, *see Thank You page for socials*

Benny Zine #1 PDF

Benny Zine #2 project info

HOW TO SUPPORT

Fanzines often donate their profits to a charity.

This zine is free, but if you want to spend some money, you can donate directly to causes that are important to the participants of this zine. This gets rid of us as the man in the middle!

FILM IS FABULOUS!

A fitting pick from one of the participants: The *Film is Fabulous* Trust, which recently recovered two episodes of *The Daleks' Master Plan*, as you may have heard!

GOOD FACT: *The zine is completely free and made by volunteer fans.*

The participants of the zine might also appreciate if you support them online, check out the "Thank you" page for socials!

DOWNLOAD THE PDF

archive.org/details/inallbutname

Was it always going to be Doctor Who in all but name?
"Pretty much(...)"

Downtime: The Lost Years of Doctor Who by Dylan Rees

A few weeks ago someone pointed out the TARDIS pin on my jacket and excitedly told me to talk to a his friend because she loves Doctor Who!

We got to talking and it was kinda weird and stilted, as it usually is for me, talking to Doctor Who fans when I don't know how "deep" into it they are.

As it turned out she was a NewWho-only fan. She told me she never bothered with 12, because she found the conclusion to *The Name of the Doctor* so stupid it put her off.

"I thought they only had 12 regenerations," she told me, "I hate shows that break their own rules like this."

You might have guessed, but I found it really hard to think of an answer to that statement without coming across as rude and the conversation faded out uncomfortably.

Shows that break their own rules? Shows that are internally inconsistent? The first thing that comes to mind for these concepts is **Doctor Who**, baby! And I absolutely love it!

The show is 62 years old for cruks sake! Of course it contradicts itself. But much more that this: It delights in doing so.

The 9th Doctor is Christopher Eccleston. The 9th Doctor is Richard E. Grant. The 9th Doctor is Nicholas Briggs—except wait, just kidding, he is not; but he's gotta have been the Doctor at some point, obviously. The 9th Doctor is impossible to determine, since the Doctor is the Timeless Child and who knows how often s/he's regenerated?

All of these are true, none of these are true: it's up to you to decide which of these are true. That's Doctor Who. I don't hate these inconsistencies! To a huge extent, they are why I love Doctor Who in the first place.

When I suggested a fanzine focusing on the most niche parts of Doctor Who "canon" I was delighted by the plethora of creators who wanted to participate; and the large amount of people who were interested in reading such a thing.

"Is this niche enough?" was a question that quickly became taboo. As you will notice flicking, clicking or scrolling through this zine, every story in here would make that probably very nice girl's head spin with how little it seems to have to do with the show that she likes.

So for everybody who feels strange talking to Doctor Who fans who aren't completely lost in the loom fluid, if you will; this is a zine just for you. I like to think that even **you** may be exposed to some Doctor Who content you haven't heard of before in here—as I definitely have been.

This was my very first time organising a project like this and I love how it came out! Thank you to all the creators and to the mods and proofreaders that made it happen.

I learned a lot about what *not* to do when running a fanzine; and though the road here was longer than expected and far from perfect, I like to think it was well worth the wait!

Happy reading!

Jo

INDEX

Gallifrey

Comedy and horror in Gallifrey 4

Tafelshrews 9

Time's Bastards (a Maverick's View of the Deca) *10*

Whispers of the Future 12

Doctor Who is dead! Long live Doctor Who

The Solar Package, A Roz Forrester story 16

Duplicity in Multiplicity 24

Any Other Name 28

Benny's 7 33

Half-Human

Kerry, the Suitcase and the Face of God 40

How Time Has Ticked a Heaven Round the Stars 46

Report of Dr. John H. Holmes Regarding The Red-Handed League 48

And He Leaps... 53

Old School

The Red Planet 59

Under the Radar

The Changing Corpse 68

Untitled 74

and i fell into a dream (a day in the life) 76

The Chance of a Lifetime 81

Afterword

Dear Readers, 90

Thank you 92

COMEDY AND HORROR IN GALLIFREY

Essay by Sir Car olyn

As with the show from which it was born, Gallifrey is a spin-off that has been through many phases in the twenty years it has existed. Something that has always struck me about the first three series, though, is how funny the episodes are in a way that is distinct from any series that follows. This is one of the questions that triggered this essay—why is it that series 1-3 of Gallifrey have a cutting humour that seems to vanish after that? Partly, I think, it's that the genre of the series shifts from high concept SF political thriller to SF action antics after series 4. Once the main cast leave the Prime Gallifrey, it no longer zeroes in on the specific workings of the Gallifreyan political engine, and therefore moves along more quickly, allowing us less time to focus on the horrors unfolding in the plot. I will only be looking at series 1-3 here, as the humour created in them is unique, I think because it puts its story under a microscope, allowing us time to linger on the devious schemes and horrific fallout of the actions of politicians.

Though I would hesitate to specifically categorise Gallifrey under the Horror genre, it is a fact that SF and Horror are genres that are closely bound together as children of the Gothic. Though I could spend my entire word count picking apart the ways the Gothic, SF, and Horror are intertwined, I will instead quickly outline the strands which will inform my thinking about the relationship between comedy and horror in SF. In his excellent book *Decoding Gender in Science Fiction*, Brian Attebery discusses the way SF grew from the Gothic, and says that "writers typically use the Gothic to tell a story of female curiosity punished, of male rebellion taken beyond all limits, and of a final descent into bodily horror: blood, gore, and dissolution."* This is certainly something that can be seen as as Pandora's scheming and ambition leads to Romana's downfall, the bloody civil war, and the collapse of Gallifreyan society.

With Horror and SF, the link between them is clear, as there is a logic to understanding that: "much science fiction [...] is really a species of horror, substituting supernatural forces with futuristic technologies"† Arguably, this is something that Gallifrey blends with its ghostly force of Pandora and the biological components of the Matrix. On top of that, the horror is often undercut with moments of humour, often in the form of characters making a quip, or through Time Lord non-reaction being in sharp contrast to Leela's—and the audience's—shock. Carroll suggests that it is this inversion of expectation that links Horror and Comedy, that despite appearing to be unlinked concepts, they are both designed to create a heightened reaction.‡

For my purposes, I will look at two different ways that Gallifrey invokes Horror and the ways it exploits comedy to heighten various situations. Horror of the body is perhaps the most obvious way to approach Horror in Gallifrey, with Cardinal Wynter and his disfigurements as one of the most visceral scenes in the show. Secondily, I will look at Horror of the mind, which is particularly pertinent to Romana, whose psychological torments cannot be understated. However, the Time Lord mind is a vast and interesting place, and in Gallifrey their psychology gets manipulated and possessed in ways that are not only terrifying to them, but horrific to Leela.

THE HORROR OF THE BODY

Let us begin with a scene that is gory, brutal, and unflinchingly Horrific—Wynter's self-mutilation at the hands of the Pandora entity. Though it is hard to argue that anything about this scene is funny, there is a level of irony at work that certainly contributes to the visceral nature of the injury. On first listen, it slowly dawns on you that Wynter is the 'Broken Man' and we are watching the inevitabililty of his

* Attebery, B (2002). Decoding Gender in Science Fiction, 27. Routledge, London.

† Carroll, N. (1987). The Nature of Horror. The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism, 46(1), 51–59. **https://doi.org/10.2307/1308**

‡ Carroll, N. (1999). Horror and Humor. The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism, 57(2), 145–160. **https://doi.org/10.2307/432309**

death, something which feels brutal and chilling.

However, on subsequent listens, it is clearer than ever how flippant the Time Lords are to everything around them. Not only this, but when contrasted with Leela's humanity and care for the Broken Man, there is something bitterly funny about how incongrous the viewpoints are. For instance, the way Romana treats the death is to brush it off completely:

> **ROMANA:** *Ah. Leela. How is your dead body?*
>
> **LEELA:** *It is not my body, but K9 is trying to identify it from an artron figment.*
>
> **ROMANA:** *(laughs) You mean he's using his imagination? Well that's a first.*

while Braxiatel seems almost squeamish about the whole affair:

> **LEELA:** *He was burned, his hands were... pulverized. His wrists were still dripping bloodas if his hands were freshly crushed—*
>
> **BRAXIATEL:** *A simple "yes, I'm sure" would have sufficed.*

The fact that Leela is being so sincere about the death while the Time Lords around her are acting like it is an inconvenience or annoyance really serves to heighten our own reaction to it. Because we, like Leela, are supposed to react with sorrow for Wynter, the callous detachment of Romana and Brax creates an atmosphere that is so incongruous to expectation that it becomes funny when Brax recoils in disgust, or Wynter calls Leela's mourning a "peculiar notion".

Indeed, Wynter's reaction to what will be his own corpse seems callous on first listen, but is almost agonising on relisten. He has little to no interest in the man who suffered, but is more concerned with security threats and his own position. As the Time Lords are wont to do, he dehumanises the Broken Man and sees him more as a piece in the political game rather than an actual person. This dehumanisation is seen again and again in Gallifrey—not only for the Broken Man, but for anyone seen as too "other" from a Time Lord. In the Broken Man's case, though, the reaction is especially shocking knowing he was once a Time Lord. "How's that for living forever?" Andred asks bitterly about the husk of Wynter's body, and the irony of the remark is enough to make you chuckle.

Though Wynter's injury is the most extensive, he is far from the only Time Lord to be grievously injured. Narvin getting hurt, however, is more often presented less seriously than a case such as Wynter's. He is often among the first to make quips about the danger of situations, and saying things like "if we're all going to die, we might as well do it in peace" is funny because of the sheer lack of sincerity he shows in the face of peril.

He also makes this remark about the Broken Man situation:

> *We have an unidentified dying Time Lord infected with an undiagnosed pathogen who arrived on Davidia in a TARDIS that is actually still in bay nine and hasn't left Gallifrey. Perhaps the President considers this sort of thing as "business as usual" under her jurisdiction.*

which shows that same Gallifreyan detachment towards the very real, very brutal injuries sustained by Wynter. However, when Narvin gets injured in Fractures, despite the fact that he is struck unconscious and clearly is badly hurt, Leela takes on the role of the unconcerned, from her commenting that "even in his sleep, Narvin must correct me" to her reaction of him getting Knocked out a second time of "not again!"

By underplaying the severity of Narvin's injury knocking him out for almost an entire episode and pairing that injury with the blasé attitude of so-called doctor, Elbon, Narvin's injury seems a lot more amusing than Wynter's. Perhaps it is a little to do with the dehumanisation, or perhaps that Narvin as a

character serves a different role in the wider Gallifrey story. Perhaps it is just funny to hurt Narvin. As a main character, and despite the repeated death fakeouts, we know that Narvin will not truly succumb to his injuries, unlike Wynter or indeed any of the other minor characters who could fall victim to the plot killing them at any time.

This is certainly true for the legion of Time Lords who get infected and transformed by the Free Time virus, which is the last point I would like to touch on here. Panacea sees an awful lot of damage done to an awful lot of people, and poor wretches like Janartis and Elbon get, to quote the "unrecognised medical term", zombified. There is a whole essay in this by itself over the Time Lords fearing to become what they see as brainless monsters, and how they treat the zombies as utterly disposable, but the point I would like to raise is that Panacea is perhaps one of the most laugh-out-loud funny episodes, from Romana demanding "I am an ex-president, get me out of here!" to Narvin driving a TARDIS to the theme of a Nokia ringtone.

It seems that more prescient the threat, the more jokes we get. A deadly virus is threatening to sweep over all of Gallifrey and destroy the Time Lord way of life, all while Leela "advocates unsafe medical procedure[s]" and Narvin is being teased about stamp collecting. By cracking these jokes and witty one-liners, we are shown an incongruous picture of Horror and Comedy which serves to highlight the damage being done to people, as well as build tension in the plot.

THE HORROR OF THE MIND

The Free Time virus is not just a physical threat, however. It serves not only to transform Time Lords into zombies, but threatens to strip them of all that makes them by removing their regenerations. This "downgrade" is perhaps what the Time Lords themselves see as a bigger threat, as without their regeneration and longevity, how can they be the overwhelming power they once were? Certainly, loss of regeneration is something we see as a Horror through Narvin, and we later see this have an incredibly profound mental effect upon him.

Regeneration and the mind are two things that are clearly linked in Gallifrey, from Andred's personality change to the loss of autonomy caused by the Free Time virus. However, it is Leela's reaction to the "life change" that really invokes a sense of horror. *Spirit* is, of course, an excellent episode, but when you stop to really think about what happens to Leela in the Sensory Tanks, the body swap becomes quite Horrific. She is already struggling with the way Time Lords can "throw off your form like an old sheet and be a new person, someone I would no longer recognise", but to be forcibly jumbled into Romana's mind and faced with all the fears of regeneration and abandonment in a shadowy world is something terrifying.

Despite the way this should be played for Horror, however, we all come away from the episode with a sense of them having had a fun holiday. This is because so many of the beats where Leela should be facing her worst nightmares are undercut with Comedy. For instance, there are plenty of moments like this, where Leela reflects on how she must sound to Romana:

> **LEELA:** *Do I always speak in such plaintive metaphor?*
>
> **ROMANA:** *It has a certain unpolished charm, does it not?*
>
> **LEELA:** *What a jumble! Everything in my head is a mad jumble! Part me, part you. I can't think straight!*
>
> **ROMANA:** *I understand you! But give me a moment, and I will say it more prettily.*

This is amusing to us as listeners, as we are obviously very familiar with the ways Romana and Leela both speak and act, though if we really look at what is going on here, we see Romana and Leela both having very different experiences to the swap. Romana is seeing the world with new eyes, awed at how much she can feel, while Leela is a "jumble", having lost part

of herself to the Time Lord way of thinking. For Leela, the Horror is the same as what the Free Time virus is doing: stripping away her autonomy and the parts of her mind that make her herself.

Another consideration is that while Romana and Leela are having their holiday, they are paralleled with Hallan and Melyin flirting with each other in a completely unserious way. This serves to lighten the episode, especially when Leela and Romana are having heavy conversations. Then paired with the moments of comedy during the body swap, the Horror is brushed away and Leela and Romana revert to being who they were before, albeit with slightly more open minds.

For Leela, the Horror of the mind presents itself in repression, but for the Time Lords, the Horror comes from allowing themselves to let themselves think and feel beyond what they are supposed to. This is what the Pandora entity does to Romana as she takes over her mind and compels her to become the Imperiatrix, something which Romana has always been adamant she will not become. Throughout series 2, Romana is increasingly confused and scared, of herself and of what Pandora will do if she allows her self control to slip.

Romana's nightmares of being Imperiatrix are especially interesting to look at. They aren't particularly *funny* scenes, but there is a certain level of morbid humour in them from the way Romana reacts to the visions. She is horrified by the destruction she is seeing, but she also seems to find an amusement in torturing Pandora for information.

Though I would hesitate to call anything in this scene Comedy, it does give us that incongruous feeling of seeing our Romana act in a way we would not expect. Her amusement at the situation, rather than ours, is what heightens the Horror here. Not only is Romana afraid of the future she sees in her dreams, but she is enacting more violence than we would expect on Pandora in order to try and circumvent it. And, as with Wynter, there is a certain inevitability to listening to this, as it is all part of Pandora's plan all along.

It is not just Romana's mind that Pandora torments, however. Just as the Free Time virus possesses Time Lords and strips them of their agency, Pandora possesses Romana and Darkel and uses them as puppets to enact her wicked visions. Under her influence, Romana murders Andred and Darkel lays all the foundations that bring them to civil war, and both seem to enjoy their actions slightly too much. Again, it is their amusement that heightens the Horrors, especially in Darkel's case as she seems to revel in manipulating and influencing events, even if she cannot see how things are working against her.

Braxiatel too suffers from Horror of the mind, though entirely of his own making as he takes the past and present forms of Pandora into his mind and is forced to flee Gallifrey. Arguably, it is the Pandora entity that makes him commit atrocities in the Bernice Summerfield range, but that is a different conversation about a different set of Horrors. In Gallifrey, Brax taking on Pandora is seen as a tragedy, because for him and the Time Lords, being forced away from Gallifrey is a great punishment as so much of their identity is wrapped up in the planet. Again, the Pandora possession is Horrific to them because it forces them to lose a part of themselves and their own autonomy, and not always in ways they can see.

> **ROMANA:** *Then help me!*
>
> **PANDORA:** *I will help you, on one condition. You must free me from the partition.*
>
> **ROMANA:** *You're in no position to ask for deals. I don't think that you have anything to say after all. K9, squeeze her.*
>
> **PANDORA:** *Wait. I will help you stop Darkel.*

It is also a triumph and a Horror when Braxiatel returns in *Mindbomb* and Pandora is let loose on Darkel. Her tormented screams are certainly Horrific, though what undercuts her death is the conversation our main characters have after her demise:

> **LEELA:** *So finally. The evil, twisted creature is gone forever.*
>
> **NARVIN:** *And Darkel is dead.*
>
> **LEELA:** *That is what I meant.*
>
> **ROMANA:** *Thank you Brax! Now perhaps we can get on with the resignation and put everything back to normal.*
>
> **NARVIN:** *I'm not sure normal is the most desirable state of affairs.*

There is a lot going on here after a woman has just been brutally eaten from the inside out in front of them, but none of them seem particularly bothered. In fact, I would go so far as to say that the reactions Leela and Romana have are funny, as Romana just wants to move on with the election, and Leela is taking pleasure in Darkel's downfall. These are completely not the reactions you would expect anyone to have in this situation, and the fact that they just do not care creates a Comedy that only Gallifrey can give you in the face of torments of the mind.

It would be remiss of me to write an essay about Comedy in Gallifrey without mentioning two of Narvin's funniest lines:

> *You can't let her stab me, K9, it's not legal!*

and

> *So much for non-intervention. Would anyone else care to join this conga over Rassilon's grave?*

Though neither of these particularly serve my point about Horror, both come at times when Narvin feels under threat, either for his own safety against Leela with a knife, or for the safety of the planet he is bound to protect as he feels control slipping away. These funniest lines, and indeed the funniest lines of many characters do come at the height of stress, which is often the height of Horror in this series.

There are many more quips I could discuss, and there are funny moments beyond series 3 which are Comedic and Horrific in their own rights—Narvin's loss of regenerations being a prime example. But here, I hope I have shown just how entwined Comedy and Horror is in early Gallifrey, and how that helps to make it such a unique and compelling series.

TAFELSHREWS

by Boneworms

Excerpt taken from A Brief Guide to Galactic Wildlife, Chapter 7: Animals of the Kasterborous System:

Tafelshrews are small, rodent-like mammals native to the planet of Gallifrey. They range in colour from tan to a red-orange colour, matching the sand of Gallifrey's deserts. They average 6 to 11 centimeters in length, with an additional 5 to 9 when including the tail.

Tafelshrews can be found in a variety of habitats across Gallifrey. Depending on the subspecies, they can be found anywhere from grassland ecosystems to the rocky slopes of Gallifrey's mountain ranges. It is also not uncommon for tafelshrews to take up residence in the homes and buildings of Gallifreyans. Due to this, they are considered a pest species by many.

In the wild, tafelshrews make their homes in burrows. These burrows typically consist of two main chambers, one for habitation and one for food storage. The food storage chamber is often much smaller than the habitation chamber, and some burrows even lack it. Tafelshrews fill the habitation burrows of their chambers with mosses and dried leaves that are used to make nests.

The diet of a tafelshrew consists mostly of plant matter, but they are known to eat insects when their usual food sources are depleted. They prefer to consume the roots of plants and will often dig their burrows under their preferred food species in order to have easy access to the roots. Tafelshrews are able to get almost all of their necessary water intake from their food, which is helpful as they often live in the drier regions of Gallifrey.

Tafelshrews are largely solitary animals, spending most of their adult lives on their own. Pairs of tafelshrews will come together during the mating season and stay together until the offspring are around one year of age. Some tafelshrews will pair with the same mate throughout their life, while others will choose a new mate every time they breed. Litter sizes range from two to seven offspring, and once they reach sexual maturity, at around two years old, females will generally give birth to a litter once every three years.

At one year old, juvenile tafelshrews are able to live completely independently and will leave their parents in order to set up their own burrow. After this point they will not return to the original burrow, but may still remain within the territory of their parents. Tafelshrews are not particularly territorial animals, so it is not uncommon for them to have overlapping home ranges.

Like most Gallifreyan organisms, tafelshrews have a long lifespan when compared to that of similar animals from different planets. They on average live to be twenty years old, but in captivity have been known to reach thirty.

TIME'S BASTARDS
A MAVERICK'S VIEW OF THE DECA

Essay by Aristide Twain

There are few things in the ever-expanding *Doctor Who* universe which boast of such an improbably lopsided ratio of source material to fandom engagement as that which is displayed by the Deca.

This might be considered surprising, in view of the blunt fact that Gary Russell's *Divided Loyalties*, which got the whole shebang started, was not, by most accounts, a good book. Indeed, to the Deca Fan—how strange that there are such creatures!—its actual flashback chapters are fairly thin gruel. Dr Who and the Master barely interact, much to the chagrin of the "Thoschei" shippers who make up a sizable percentage of the Deca fandom; moreover, Russell eschews the traditional nickname of "Theta Sigma", persistently referring to the young Doctor as simply "the Doctor" throughout, creating a profoundly alienating effect for those to whom "the Deca" and "Theta Sigma" are essentially synonymous.

Certainly every fandom has its cottage industry dutifully pumping out the much-vaunted High School AUs; and the Deca also has more than a few shades of the separate fanfiction trend of staking out the recent pre-history of a given setting, fleshing out the youthful exploits of the protagonists' parents and mentors into a setting in its own right. But nothing about either proposition necessarily called for this puzzling fealty to the framework established by *Divided Loyalties*; half the time, it would suit the romantic's purpose just as well, if not better, to imagine the Child Doctor and Child Master as two singular souls, alone against the world, than this curiously over-stuffed club of ten, filled out with randos and nobodies.

And how strange that line-up is! The Rani or Drax's presence might in each case be excused on the basis that they were, after all, established as schoolmates of Dr Who's on television; and if one is (daftly) going to pretend that the War Chief is a different person from the Master, then alright, he has to be there: it's obvious enough from *The War Games* that he and Patrick Troughton have Some Sort Of HistoryTM. But truly, nothing about the eponymous character of *The Time Meddler* remotely suggested he and William Hartnell had ever been acquainted, let alone belonged to the same nebulously-defined exclusive student group. The Toymaker of *The Celestial Toymaker* did, admittedly, have a history with Dr Who, but Russell is tentative at best in asserting any personality transference from Rallon to Michael Gough's Toymaker, by and large writing Rallon's possession by the ancient, disembodied spirit of the Toymaker as a straightforward bodily hijack. When it gets to "the guy who came up with the *Genesis of the Daleks* plan", one begins to get the strong sense that ol'Gary is either raking through the back of the drawer, or actively taking the mickey.

So why? Perhaps a quirk of fate. They happen. But my guess—as someone whose staunch antagonism to War Chief-Master dissociation has always left them as something of an outsider to Deca fandom, never mind my other qualms about *Divided Loyalties*—my guess is that there is something more at work. The Deca made it through the Darwinian process of fannish folklore refinement because it fits a niche; because it fulfills a very particular purpose.

To wit, I believe that serves to resolve an aesthetic paradox. Dr Who and the Time Lords are defined in opposition to one another; outside of a few aberrations like *The Hand of Fear*, the character's status as an interventionist time-traveller has been presented as synonymous with his status as a Renegade. The Doctor is unlike the typical Time Lord, up to and including his very name, with it having gradually become established lore that the average Gallifreyan has a conventional name like "Spandrell" or "Rodan", *not* a title like "the Hussar" or "the Magician". In short, the Doctor is *special*, by choice if not by birth. That much was inevitable: if you reel the eternal wanderer back home, as *The War Games* and *The Deadly Assassin* did, every rule of narrative calls for a strong sense of contrast.

Yet, just as inevitably, the other free-roaming Chronarchs encountered over the course of the TV series tended to be constructed as cracked mirrors of Dr Who himself, not extrapolated from that inhospitable homeworld; and wound up having a lot more in common with the Doctor than with any of their more homebody-like

kinsfolk. The Meddling Monk is a reckless Doctor; the Master is a power-hungry Doctor; the Rani a Doctor devoid of empathy, Drax a Doctor devoid of heroic aspirations, and so on.

Well, perhaps Renegades are simply an established countercultural archetype on Gallifrey that all sorts of oddballs come to fill—that is certainly the thinking behind the likes of the Corsair, asserting the existence of Doctorish figures throughout the history of the Shining World. But even that doesn't satisfy given the aforementioned televised assertion that the Master, the Rani *and* the Doctor all attended the Celestials' Academy at the *same time*, which strains belief under the theory individual Renegades arise independently, even before you reintroduce the likes of the Monk (who might not *necessarily* be schoolmates of Dr Who's, but are certainly his rough contemporaries). And besides, does it not lessen the mythic perfection of Gallifrey the Unchanging, of the Time Lords' ten million years of absolute stagnancy, if they have always been a breeding ground for larger-than-life adventurers?

Especially in hindsight, with the Doctor's lifetime dovetailing into the Time Lords' embroilment into an unprecedented, cosmic Time War that upends their entire way of life, is it not more elegant to regard the coming of a generation of future Renegades as very much a *special* event—which allows us to essentially keep the original notion of the Doctor as a mold-breaking reaction against Archonic orthodoxy while extending it to cover an entire coven of their peers?

A-*ha.*

Frame things thusly, and Gary Russell's Deca begins to look a lot less like a dubious *Muppet Babie*s exercise arbitrarily lumping disparate characters together for the sake of school shenanigans, and a lot more like the perhaps-awkward execution of a necessary reconciliation between rival narrative trends. Of *course* the Doctor and friends all took on similar personas when forced off Gallifrey by a variety of circumstances: they devised their particular form of rebellion *together*, at a formative age.

But perhaps there is more to it. Where *Lungbarrow* sought to assert that the Doctor's personal idiosyncrasies derived from his status as the reincarnation of the ancient, ambiguously-supernatural figure known only as the Other, *The Book of the War*, flagship of a spin-off with ample motivation to decentre Dr Who's status as a one-of-a-kind Chosen One above and beyond the existence of the Rani & Co., saw an opportunity. Thus did the concept of the Broken Generation arise: suppose that the "impurities in the breeding-engine systems" had touched more than the embryonic Theta Sigma; suppose that the Other's tendrils, that long-simmering disruption in the stagnant clockwork of Gallifrey, had brushed against many looms, many cradles…

Faction Paradox is hardly a series or fandom prone to boarding-school yarns, and the idea serves only to justify the simultaneous births, to House Lungbarrow and House Dvora, of Grandfather Paradox, the Imperator (Morbius), the War King (the Master), as well as a certain fourth chap (Dr Who). This, it does without dwelling on the implications for their respective Academy days. But, for all of Lawrence Miles's creative animosity towards Gary Russell's approach to the *Who*niversal sandbox, the two notions prove surprisingly weldable—as most recently implemented by Cubicle Seven's *Doctor Who* role-playing game, whose background material for Gallifrey simultaneously name-checks the Deca and the *Faction Paradox* notion of a broader, unprecedentedly free-spirited generation of Time Tots heralding the thawing-out of static old Time Lord society.

Why yes! Of *course* those changeling-Children, Time's Bastards, those misfits given leave to rebel, though not necessarily the will to do so, by their biodata's anomalous discrepancies relative to the Rassilonian programming, of course they would flock together in little clubs, little groups, little underground societies. Seeking to explore the boundaries of their intellectual freedom, to change the world, or simply to find sympathetic ears. No longer need we even think of the Deca as the Specialest Group of the Specialest Boys (and Girls), for, while the future Doctor and Master gathered *their* friends in *that* particular clique, there might have been untold other underground gangs boasting of members both illustrious and low…

Well, that's how *I* make sense of it. And anyway, it *is* a good name.

WHISPERS OF THE FUTURE

by Gale Heimeldat

When Chiomai emerged from their trance, they weren't alone. A woman crouched on the other side of the small campfire, only half visible in the shadows. Instead of glowing green in the half-light, the stranger's eyes were unnervingly dark, reflecting only a faint spark of firelight. Chiomai had never seen such a thing.

Which meant this woman was either a mutant or—an alien. Whoever or whatever she was, she knew how to move silently in Chiomai's own territory, and she had approached the fire from upwind. If she meant harm, she could have killed Chiomai in their trance; so Chiomai saw no cause for alarm.

The wind shifted slightly, and Chiomai caught a whiff of the strange woman's scent: leather and fur mingled strangely with plastic and metal, and under it all lay a faint odor that must be the woman's sweat, but it had an odd tang like nothing Chiomai had smelled before.

For a moment they both stared wide-eyed at one another. Then Chiomai took a deep breath, flicked their ears forward to avoid any perception of insult, and said, "I think we both have the same question." They spoke Old Low, the dialect of the primitive desert tribes, rather than their native tongue.

"I think we do," said the woman. She spoke the same language, but with a stilted accent that didn't belong to any district Chiomai knew.

"What manner of person are you?" asked Chiomai. "You smell one part Shobogan, one part Citadel, and one part – something else."

"And you look one part man, one part lion, and one part something else," said the woman. She shifted to a cross-legged position and leaned forward, holding out her hands to the warmth of the small fire. Her fur cloak fell back, revealing a sleeveless leather shirt over tight leggings and sturdy boots. It was an odd costume: the cloak was clearly Shobogan craftsmanship, but the shirt looked as if the woman must have sewn it to her own strange patchwork pattern, while the plastiform boots belonged on a Citadel guard.

"I'm Chiomai, from Ginseng," said Chiomai. "Have you heard of it?"

The woman shook her head. "Is it another world?"

"Of course not!" Chiomai tried to swallow their instinctive distaste at the idea, and instead found themselves feeling a pang of sadness. Chiomai's people had become so obscure that they were treated like aliens on their own world! "It's a district," Chiomai sighed. "The last enclave of the first Gallifreyans. The Time Lords have spent millenia trying to forget that we exist; if you're from the Citadel, I suppose it's no surprise that you've never heard of us."

"I'm not—" The woman paused. "Yes, I suppose I am from the Citadel. I often spend time out here, wandering alone or meeting with the Shobogan tribes, but I always return to the Citadel. I belong there as much as anywhere."

"But you came from elsewhere," Chiomai said. They examined the woman closely, noting the gooseflesh on her skin despite the pleasant weather and the way her eyes still remained dark instead of flashing green or gold. "You're un-Gallifreyan." Perhaps that should have been alarming, but instead Chiomai felt a deep stirring of excitement. They'd never met someone from another world.

"I am Leela of the Sevateem," said the woman. "I'm human."

"Human." Chiomai rolled the unfamiliar word around their mouth like a sip of wine. "How did you come here? The Time Lords aren't known for welcoming aliens."

"I came with permission from a former President of the Time Lords," she said. "And I stayed because another Time Lord took me as his wife." There was definite pride in her voice, as well there should be! Any alien who could win a Time Lord's hand in marriage—particularly when most Time Lords didn't marry at all—must be quite remarkable.

"You say you are one of the first Gallifreyans?" asked Leela. "Was this a whole world of lion-men once?"

"Many millennia ago. They didn't look like me or like you." Chiomai held out a delicate, long-clawed hand, mentally setting it beside the ancient fossils that showed heavy blunt paws with barely functional thumbs. "They were larger and more bestial. Some of their descendants became the Ginsengi and others became the Shobogans. My people built grand cities while the ancestors of the Time Lords were still hunting with spears and living in tents. But Time brought us down and lifted them high. There aren't many of us left now, and soon there will be none."

Leela went still. "Your people are dying?"

Chiomai snorted and flicked their ears. "Nothing so dramatic. We're leaving Gallifrey. We still remember how to build spacecraft, even if none of us have gone beyond the atmosphere in ten thousand years." They hesitated for a moment, wondering if this strange woman deserved a warning. Should she be categorised with the Time Lords or the Shobogans? The Ginsengi had chosen to say nothing to the Time Lords, who treated them with such scorn; but they had warned the Shobogans, and a few of the primitive tribes had agreed to leave with the Ginsengi.

"Something troubles you?" asked Leela.

Chiomai looked up sharply at her. "Why do you say that?"

"You sit tensely, and your ears fold back."

The stranger was impressively perceptive. It made Chiomai feel more inclined to warn her. A Time Lord would never have noticed or cared about a Ginsengi's feelings. "Time is a strange creature," said Chiomai slowly. "The Time Lords think they control it, but putting a lion in a cage doesn't make it tame."

Leela smiled slightly. Her teeth flashed very bright in the firelight, and Chiomai felt surprised to see that she had no fangs. "I have seen it bite them often enough," Leela said wryly, "though they like to pretend otherwise. Is this what worries you?"

"My people have never tried to control Time," Chiomai said. "Instead, we go out into the wilderness and listen. Sooner or later, Time whispers its secrets to us."

"This is why you sit here alone?" Leela glanced around at the darkness as if she expected to see Time lurking in the shadows. "I'm sorry if I have interrupted your ritual," she said quietly. "If you wish me to leave–"

"Not yet," said Chiomai. "The others might tell me to send you away, but..." They hesitated again, looking at Leela's black eyes, the alien way they refused to glow in the dark. She came from another world; maybe that meant she could leave more easily than the rest of them. "You're not a Time Lord, even if you live with them," said Chiomai after a moment. "I think you might understand the great secret that Time has told my people."

Leela nodded soberly. "I will listen."

"The Ginsengi knowledge of Time deals in possibilities, not certainties," warned Chiomai. "We hear whispers of what might be, but the future is far less knowable than the Time Lords would have you believe."

Leela snorted. "They would have me believe they know everything. I know better than to take their word without question."

She was wiser than most. Chiomai smiled slightly in the Shobogan fashion, showing their fangs. Leela smiled back, showing her lack of fangs. That was wrong. Chiomai felt oddly sure that some part of Leela was missing, or not yet complete. "I think... I think Time whispers to me about you, as well," Chiomai said, surprised.

Leela's eyes widened and she leaned forward again. "What does it say?" she asked quietly. "Wait—if it speaks of my death, tell me nothing. I do not wish to know how my story ends."

"Nothing like that," said Chiomai. "I only get the sense that you're a half-grown lion. You have the spirit of the beast, but not its body, not yet. Does that mean something to you?"

Leela considered for a moment, then shook her head. "My husband and I sometimes call

ourselves lions, but I don't know if that means anything in the language of your fortune-telling."

Chiomai's ears flicked back slightly. "It's not fortune-telling," they said. "It's just hearing the rhythm of probabilities."

Leela nodded, though Chiomai couldn't tell whether she really understood or not. The Shobogans always believed the Ginsengi used some sort of magic to see the future; but Leela had perhaps lived among Time Lords long enough to know otherwise. "What probabilities do you hear, then?" Leela asked, stumbling a little over the temporal term. "What is this secret warning you wish to give me?"

"Chaos is coming," said Chiomai quietly. "Chaos such as the universe has not seen since the Dark Times. The gates of Past and Future tremble on their foundations. Nothing will remain sacred; nothing will be safe."

Leela was silent and thoughtful for a moment, considering the words. Chiomai was glad to see that she didn't reject the warning out of hand as a Time Lord would. "If nothing is safe," she said eventually, "then why do you leave Gallifrey? Would it not be better to face this chaos in a familiar place, where you know where to hide and how to survive?"

Chiomai shook their head. Leela's words did seem logical, but something in Chiomai's hearts screamed warnings against staying here. The Ginsengi all knew that their chances were better elsewhere. "We can't see the shape of our future," Chiomai said, "but we know Gallifrey has no future for us. The same is true of the Shobogans, but you..." They paused again, drawing a long breath of Leela's strange scent. "I can't tell. Perhaps you would be safer if you flee with us; perhaps not."

"I would not leave in any case," said Leela evenly. "I do not run from danger, and besides, my husband is here. This is where I belong now, for better or for worse."

Chiomai inclined their head. They felt slightly disappointed by Leela's choice, but the feeling had nothing to do with whispers from the future; it was a purely internal emotion, a desire to spend more time learning about this stranger from another world. "Then I can only hope my warning does you some good," said Chiomai.

"I will be wary," said Leela. She leaned forward suddenly and touched the back of Chiomai's hand, lightly enough that Chiomai barely felt it through the thin fur across their knuckles. Leela's unreflective eyes were like black pits in the shadows cast by the fire. "Let me give you a warning also," she said. "Your people must be just as wary when you begin your journey. Gallifrey is old and set in its ways; everything here moves slowly. Other worlds are full of sudden change and danger."

"We will be careful," said Chiomai.

For a moment, they sat there in silence, meeting each other's eyes. There didn't seem to be anything more to say, unless Chiomai were to start asking questions about Leela's alien origins. But the topic didn't seem appropriate, not in this odd tense atmosphere with the weight of the uncertain future hanging over their heads in the dark.

Leela rose in a sudden smooth motion and pulled her cloak tight around her shoulders. "Thank you for warning me," she said. "I should leave you to your—your listening."

"I only wish I could give you more than vague apprehensions of danger," said Chiomai.

"It is enough," said Leela. "I will not be caught off guard."

Chiomai wondered if she was ever off guard. "I wish I could meet you again," they said, "but it's unlikely. You can tell the Time Lords, if any of them care, that they have seen the last of the Ginsengi."

The alien woman nodded, then vanished into the shadows as silently as she had arrived, taking her unique scent with her. Chiomai stared after her into the dark for several long minutes and wondered if there was anything significant to her visit. It made them feel a little better about leaving Gallifrey, at least, knowing that the wider universe held people like Leela,

people the Ginsengi could easily understand and befriend. But if Leela's presence on Gallifrey changed anything, if it made any difference to the chaos rumbling on the horizons of Time, Chiomai couldn't see it.

Then again, it was hard to hear the whispers of the future, and even harder to interpret them. Perhaps nobody could make any difference to the coming storm. Perhaps they would all, Time Lords and Ginsengi and alien huntresses alike, be swept up in the currents of Time and drowned. Or perhaps they would all survive. Nothing would be safe, but that didn't mean everything would be ruined.

Chiomai let out a long huff of breath and scraped sand and pebbles over their fire until the flames died and the coals were hidden. Their mind was too full of chattering thoughts; they doubted Time would tell them anything more tonight. It was better simply to go home, share Leela's warning about the greater universe with anyone who would listen, and prepare themself for the great journey that was coming.

THE SOLAR PACKAGE, A ROZ FORRESTER STORY

by Laureline Lechat

Solar Package. That's what they called it. Once, he had told her he wanted to be buried. Get his body shipped off earth, put in the ground of a colonyworld graveyard. But the Guild had paid for the ceremony and they wouldn't cover an offworld trip. And falling in the line of duty wouldn't get a derogation for a burial on earthground. He would have to settle for a Solar Package.

The columbarium was mostly empty. The hall was filled by black obsidian pillars on which the names of those fortunate enough to afford a concession in perpetuity were engraved in gold letters. The floor and ceiling were made of simile marble, polished enough to reflect the pillars and give the hall a sense of grandeur. It was aiming to produce a sense of mournful vertigo. It seemed meant to proclaim 'this is the hall of the dead, do not step into it lightly'.

"Martle. Fenn." Roz announced to the receptionist. She was wearing the dark blue trousers of her uniform, with a crumpled brown shirt. The clerk was a bot. It wouldn't judge her lack of decorum. 'I'm here to pick him up'. She was speaking clearly, her voice on the verge of breaking.

"You are?" it asked in its monotonous tone.

"Adjudicator Forrester," she replied "his next of kin," she added, in a whisper.

"I see," the bot said, "please sign this discharge waiver while I fetch him." It didn't move from behind its desk. Instead, a mechanised system reached to the higher levels of the Colombarium's wall, opened a small door, and extracted an aluminum canister from it. It lowered itself back. The receptionist picked it very carefully and held it out to Roz solemnly. "Fenn Martle." It announced. "We thank you for your patronage. We hope you won't need our services any time soon."

The bot was creeping her out. She held tightly onto the smooth grey urn and crossed the hall in the other direction.

"Adjudicator Forrester!" the Receptionist called out. She turned back to see him waving in her direction. "A tip is customary."

She is running through the street of the Undercity. It's Dark. The streetlights are blasting their white light in uneven spots. The air is foul. Heavy. Reeks of Pollution. Feels like decanted exhaust fumes. And then, it reeks of blood.

Cruk.

There's a corpse in the gutter.

Earth Reptile in a flannel shirt. Lying in a pool of his own blood. Skull open. "Martle!" She calls out.

"Cruk!" he comes from the other direction.

"No trace of him?"

"He's lost us. Goddesscrukkindamnit."

"You think he did this?" she gestures to the body on the ground, covering her mouth with her hand. She has seen death of course, still makes her sick.

"No way. We were on his tail, he wouldn't have the time. I'll contact the precinct." She watches him speak. She watches him as he makes the call.

They aren't together yet. They will be.

And then...

"What we looking for again?" Jones asked Kelly. She was crouching on top of her chair, lumped over her cup of tea. She was pouring sugar cube after sugar cube into her drink, watching with childlike wonder the smoke twirl into the air.

"You know what we're after." Kelly was sitting on the café's window clutching his

binoculars. “Don’t play dumb J. You know it doesn’t work on me.” Holding the blinds open with his fingers, Kelly was a distinguished, sharply dressed slender man, who contrasted in every way possible with his partner. Every shred of dignity he was carrying himself with had to be enough for the both of them, as Jones was stuffing her face with Yemayan pastries.

“I know... I know...” she managed to articulate. “But I don’t like it. Devalues us.”

Without relaxing his focus, he let out a long sigh.

“Yeah,” he said “I don’t like it either. But we do what we’re told. You know that.”

“I don’t like who we’re being told by is all.” getting up, she held the other end of the blind up and held her head to the window. There was nothing to see outside. On the opposite end of the abyss that was called a street, in the tower across the chasm, there was no sign of the target whatsoever. Disappointed, she sat down on the ground, her back to the window.

They stayed like this in comfortable silence for a while.

They’re at his place. Two bedroom apartment in Overcity. Twice as big as hers.

“Want something to drink?” The second bedroom has been turned into an office of sorts. A desk. A sofa. A cheap piano.

“Yeah, get me a brandy!” She sits on the sofa, she has taken her shoes off when she got in. She lays comfortably on her knees on the tired couch. Martle brings her a drink in an old dirty glass.

She feels safe here.

“This crukking job uh?” he says, conversationally.

“This job” she agrees.

“Maybe we should retire, you know.” a smile hides at the corner of his mouth. “go private.”

“We have the experience for sure,” she agrees. “But no” she shakes her head “Justice by our side.”

He laughs “And fairness be our friend,” he says, making his voice deeper.

She looks at him. He stops laughing. His eyes fill with concern.

“You okay?” he asks.

“This crukking job,” she says, “this crukking job.”

“Oh Cruk,” Kelly finally said after a while. “Get up, he’s on the move.”

“I beg your pardon?” The adjudicator secular asked from the other side of the screen.

“I’m sorry ma’am. But I can‘t come in today either,” Roz replied, apologetically “I’ve collected the remains of Adjudicator Martle and am going to scatter them according to his wishes.”

“Forrester! The disposal of late Adjudicator Martle has been paid for and organised by the Guild.” Adjudicator Secular Rashid could barely hide the anger in her voice. “A ceremony that you notably missed, Adjudicator. You have already extended the duration of your leave beyond what the regulations allow. You are bordering on insubordination.”

“Oh sorry Ma’am, I‘m going through a wave-patch, can’t hear you,” she put her hand to the camera and mimed scrambling noises with her voice before disconnecting the call. She didn’t expect anything from it but it was still the right thing to do, wasn’t it? Do right by Martle one last time.

Even knowing where she came from, Martle had never judged her from it. And it had to go the way it had gone. Martle had to turn up dirty and he was. He was about to kill her. She was sure to die at the hand of this bot but the cavalry

had turned up and then... "Watch it crukko!" another driver yelled at her. Brought back from dissociation, she swerved downwards. Levitating in the street-wells of the Overcity gigantic signage indicated "ROADBLOCK AHEAD—GO UNDER" She sighed, and followed the signage home.

Ahead of the road, a squad of adjudicators had stopped traffic. They had secured everything around the plaza in one of the lower towers. Medical had come in and retrieved the victims, but Detectives were still on the scene. They had drawn the silhouette of the dead body in chalk, and marked most of the evidence.

Above, Kelly was watching them investigate through the focal lens of his sniper rifle.

"Shouldn't we move?" Jones was perched on the ledge behind him, absentmindedly fiddling with a cubey object.

"Yeah. Probably," Kelly agreed. "You're worried?"

"Don't like the long distance. I work best up close and personal." She replied.

"That's why they pair us up."

"Nah, they let us stay together cause we make the hell of a team," she said, proudly. It was no exaggeration, just a statement of fact.

"That's true," he smiled. "Come on, let's go before they can figure ballistics."

"Where next?" she opened her cube. Inside, a small projector turned on, displaying a list of names on an holographic surface.

"You can cross out Senator Mars'ell," Kelly pointed out, gesturing at the plaza down below. "I think most of these are in the Undercity."

"Nice," Jones said, "It's been a minute."

"Hang on. I missed these ones." He pointed to two names. "Cops at that. This should be fun."

The precinct is busy. Busier than ever. It's the Jubilee. The procession should ascend from the Undercity to City Hall. A message to those down below. Roz doesn't care about the politics of it all. For the first time in ten years, she thinks about Io. The palace she grew up in. She thinks of the landscapes. She thinks about her family.

"Penny for them," Iss'ar says. She's pretty sure he could read it himself with his repulsive third eye. Why they would let an Earth Reptile in the Guild is beyond her. But she has to play nice.

She smiles somewhat saccharinely.

"None of your crucking business. That's what I'm thinking about."

"Hey, is this guy bothering you?" Martle's voice comes in from behind her. He laughs. She relaxes her shoulders a bit.

"Not anymore he doesn't." Iss'ar rolls all three of his eyes at her reply.

"We're working!" he says. "You should really report that thing of yours through the proper channels."

Martle's hand is on her shoulder, on the rim of the armor, on the verge of being on her naked neck. "What thing?" they both say in unison. She smiles. Smugly.

"Or at least get a crucking room," Iss'ar mutters. Uncomfortable, he pretends he has somewhere else to be.

"By the way," she says once their colleague has left them alone. "That corpse last month. Did you hear anything? we haven't been notified of any follow through."

"Oh this," Martle replies, dismissively, "I'm sure it's nothing."

"Nothing? It's a murder isn't it."

He shrugs. "We've done what we could. No use crying over spilled milk you know."

She knows what he means. But there is an inkling of a doubt that is starting to loom in her mind.

She put the silver canister on her nightstand, and went for a quick shower. Getting for the first time of the day the time to think by herself, she broke down crying. Her eyes were still red when she answered the door.

A thin man in a suit and a short woman in a hoodie were waiting on the other side.

"Rozlyn Sarah Forrester?" the man asked.

"Yes?" she agreed.

The woman shot twice in her direction with a small pistol hidden in her sleeve. The bullets flew past her head and lodged themselves in her wall. Cruck. She would definitely lose her deposit now. She slammed the sliding door and locked it shut. She ducked and leaned against the door.

"Come on Ms Forrester, we just want to talk!" The man said, from the other side of the door. Roz looked around her apartment. One room, the bed sitting in its center, the opening to the bathroom, and the window on the same side as the door. As she was considering her options, three more shots came in through the door.

"Bullshit," she called.

"Ah you got me," the man laughed, "We actually want you dead."

Something fizzled. A small explosion let the lock loose. The door slid, pushed by the snob's bony hand.

She threw Martle at him. Pure aluminum. It wasn't exactly heavy. Only a few kilos at the most. But it still hurt him when he took it in the face. He recoiled from the shock. as Roz rushed to the ledge.

The woman tried to restrain her. Roz headbutted her and made her lose her footing.

She looked down. The abyss stretched down hundreds of miles towards solid ground. She could run to her vehicle. She would most likely get shot trying. She looked down again.

Roz threw herself at the urn and picked it up, securing it in her arms.

She hoped very hard and jumped from the ledge into the chasm.

She's working the desk today. Martle is late. He should have picked her for lunch. What if something happened to him? What if the last time they ever spoke was a stupid argument? What if she couldn't make things right?

The rest of the day passes. Martle doesn't come. She asks the front desk if he came in at all. The clerk doesn't know what to say. She goes home, shaking from anxiety.

When she opens the door, he's sitting in the sofa, an ice patch held over his face, covered in bruises. There's dried blood on his shirt.

"What happened?" she hears herself ask. There's tears forming in her throat, in her eyes, she's holding it all in, all that rage and relief she's feeling.

He just smiles faintly, too exhausted to make it as reassuring as he intends to.

"Don't worry about it, okay?"

It takes her all she's got.

"Okay," she says.

Jones had fallen on her arse. As the Forrester Woman had jumped into the abyss to plummet to the ground, she picked herself up slowly and let out a snortful, almost bark-like laughter. Kelly scowled at her, rubbing his hurt nose. She was laughing hysterically, finding the situation obviously hilarious. Failing to keep pretending to be mad at her, Kelly joined in with a succession of sensible chuckles that escalated into a booming cacophony.

They were standing there, outside the target's apartment, laughing at the precipice and looking at themselves and their embarrassment. Two killers laughing like Hyenas.

There was a ceiling above her head. Not dead. Good. Ceiling is good. What happened? Goddess. The Fall. She could remember falling, looking straight up, not down, not down, as the towers of the upper city were becoming smaller and smaller, coalescing into a shapeless mass of grey concrete, and then... And then she couldn't remember.

She was on a sheetless bed, lying directly onto the mattress. There were two people in the room with her. People... There was a woman and an arachnoid alien. She was whispering something to him, throwing quick glances towards roz. Out of the corner of her eye, she could see the Aluminum Urn standing on a chair, atop her uniform and other belongings.

Roz tried to move. Nothing. She moaned.

"Cruk that. She's awake," someone panicked.

Roz saw out of the corner of her eye the woman leave in a hurry. The man-spider approached her slowly, reaching out his appendices towards her in a gesture of

She's lying on the metal stretcher, a single sheet of white paper separating her from the thin layer of foam. her hands are restrained by her own cuffs, that have been loosely tied to the bed. Her legs have been tied up to the frame by plastic ropes.

She knows what they're going to do to her. Already, the silhouette of the well suited man and the tall woman is obscured by the dim light coming out from the outside. Already her features fade. She wants to scream but her mouth is gagged.

She remembers it all.

The Other one in the room. The Bot. And Martle. Doing his bidding. he was going to. he was going to. Oh goddess he was going to kill her. She could still feel the vibroknife in her hand, see the face he made as he realized, blood coming out of his mouth. She could still hear the trickling of his blood.

And she knows what they're going to do to her. Already, an arachnoid in a white blouse, his numerous gloved hands all shaking is approaching her. Already he shines the surgical light over her. Already she feels the needle pierce her arm and the cold liquid pouring into her veins.

As she plunges into the darkness she hangs on to that thought. She is Roslynn Forrester and she killed the only person who actually gave a cruk about her.

Jones kicked the door open. They both were wearing red visors. As soon as the door was open, Kelly rolled a small cylinder inside the house, which filled the place in thick smoke. Gun in his hand and ready to shoot, he entered first, Jones was holding onto a shining sword.

Progressing into the house, they were met with gunshots.

"What do you think you're doing?" a voice cried.

Kelly stayed in the door frame, and exchanged gunfire with the source of the voice, as Jones took advantage of the smoke to move towards it. When no more shots were coming from the other end of the courtyard. Kelly joined Jones standing over the body of a woman.

Doc Dantalion, that was the Arachnoid name, they had met before. He was a low level swindler, a quack and a crook, always drunk or drugged out of his mind. Everything about Doc Dantalion was what she hated about Spaceport Five's Undercity. And yet, he had saved her life. His friend Martha had caught her in one of her gravity traps. And he had helped her. And she didn't know what to think of it.

Before she could even thank him gunshots were heard.

"There's people after me," she said, with much effort.

"Don't try to talk, it's alright." Dantalion said.

As he turned towards the door, it burst open, letting in a smartly dressed man in and a woman covered in blood, both in combat apparel. The man was aiming his gun at them and the woman was taking a combat stance, holding onto a bloodied sword.

"Don't Shoot!" Dantalion cried. "Please Don't Shoot. Or stab. This is a clinic for Godess' sake."

Jones erupted in laughter. "It's not a clinic, you rascal, it's your spare room."

"I'm a Doctor still," he argued. "I have no quarrel with the Landsknechte. I've done your bidding before." he pleaded, his six arms raised over his head in a gesture of compliance.

"Landsknechte? Do we look Landsknechte?" Kelly's voice was filled with outrage at the notion.

"No no no, we're Imperial Guard." Jones laughed. "All the way from Saturn."

"You're a known informant sir. If you comply no harm will be done to you, we're only after your patient. Please step away," Kelly warned. "Wait," Dantalion said. "Where is Martha?"

"The woman? She tried to stop us. We can't leave witnesses," Kelly replied.

"That's what I thought. Please, you know who I am, do you know what I can do? This is adjudicator Forrester. I'm sure she was a witness to something you don't want people to find out. I can erase her memory. Make it so she never was a witness. You don't have to kill her,

She wakes up, doesn't move. Stays in her bed. She doesn't move, what is the point? Martle is dead. Killed by Falardi scum in front of her very eyes. There is no point. There is no shining justice, there is no place of respite in the world. Martle is dead and she is all alone now. Martle is dead and she's the only one to care about it. Roz's whole life died with Martle.

She finds the strength to get out of bed. She gets dressed, showers, takes a long deep breath. Martle's ashes are waiting for her on the coffee table.

She hugs the urn, silently, softly. She takes the urn in her arms and secures it tightly in the passenger seat. She climbs all the way to the Atmos-plazzas, at the very top of the Overcity. Martle always liked Patroclus' Promenade. They would sometimes stroll there on summer evenings.

She has with her a bottle of brandy. Sitting Cross-legged, she pours herself a glass, and pours Martle one, which she lets trickle on the aluminium. Taking another deep breath, she activates the panel at the side of the canister. It starts to hover, slowly at first, then it takes out, upwards, in a roaring, glorious blaze of fire and smoke.

She watches it until she cannot see it anymore, as it takes its final flight towards the rising sun.

DUPLICITY IN MULTIPLICITY

by Peterchu

"It's alright, I'm here to help. I'm not going to hurt you." A voice filtered into the burrow that was Home. Laki had been in hiding for a few days already after their clutchmates told them to flee, and this was the first recognisable sound that they had heard in that time. Before there was either silence or a strange crunching but with no footsteps as would accompany an enemy that ate so noisily.

The voice was not accompanied by footsteps either. Instead, there was a similarly rhythmic sound but softer than anyone else would be. Laki poked their pyramidal head out of the burrow to see the ruin that their world had become. The great trees of the forests were now splinters and instead of the violently violet grass, there was just ash. Before they would have had to climb the tallest trees to even glimpse the horizon and now they can see it all: how their world has become marble-smooth, how the lakes are orange with blood, and how the occasional splatter of viscera dots the paths.

"Hello there. My name is Chris Cwej, what's yours?" Laki's attention was called back to the outsider when it spoke again. This being was something different. The voice was soft, less harsh and guttural than those of Laki's kind. The skin too was soft, softer than their own scales, except for the chest which was covered in a seamless blue armour that appeared to almost be a parodical mimicry formed by those who did not understand it. It smelt *wrong*. The feet were covered and clearly bereft of the typical claws. Its face was crowned not by a ridge of bone but thousands of incredibly thin golden feathers.

"I'm Laki, did anyone else survive?"

"I suppose you are lucky. If that nest back there was yours, I'm afraid that they're all dead." It paused for a moment, glancing upwards. "I can only apologise; you and your world have gotten caught up in events beyond your comprehension." Laki followed the being's gaze upwards to find that what they had thought was the sky was instead a structure of white chalk pitted with circular indentations, large enough to stretch from horizon to horizon, the indentations being the size of moons. They couldn't even see the edge of it where there should have been at least a glimmer of blue peering through.

Laki lowered their head to ask another question, only to hear that dreaded footstepless enemy. They swiftly withdrew their head into the burrow and failed to ignore the being's anguished screams, all the while, that same *wrongness* that had come from the armour overpowered their nose.

"It's alright, I'm here to help. I'm not going to hurt you." It had been a few hours, and the voice was here again. Same words, same intonation. When Laki poked their head out, it was even the same being, staring at the mangled corpse that laid at its feet. It was muttering something to themselves, too quiet for Laki to hear, before noticing Laki's extended head. "Hello there. My name is Chris Cwej, do you know anything about who or what came here before I did?"

"It was something like you. What happened to it?" Chris glanced down worriedly at the unrecognisable body, the armour warped and blackened. It felt like he was weighing his words carefully now.

"An unexpected side-effect."

"That's not an answer," Laki protested, but Chris continued on as though he hadn't heard them.

"The armour mostly protected this one. If they didn't have it, they wouldn't have fared much better than the rest of your nest. Apologies for that, by the way. I couldn't save them."

Chris looked up to the structure overhead, before looking down at Laki. "You could come with me, I can get you somewhere safe." He said, his gaze darting upwards again, the changed arrangement of his facial features were incomprehensible to Laki, nor could they make out the smell of his emotions from under the alien scent of the armour. "There's a camp that's been set up as a result of what's happened

to your planet, I've been ordered to bring you there."

"Ordered by who?"

"My Superiors."

Despite the growing feeling of unease, Laki agreed to come with this once-dead stranger. And so they wandered, using familiar paths that Laki had once played upon with their clutch but the paths were different. Once, they had led up hills or woven through trees, but the world was empty of those things now, so the paths too were changed by some strange force. Chris claimed it to be the result of early stages of crypto-forming, but remained quiet when pressed on what exactly that meant.

A few hours into the journey, heavy winds began to tear past them accompanied by a piercing noise. It was almost like the scraping of claws on ore but amplified and altered in pitch. The only reason that Laki was not blown away was that they had dug their claws into the soft ground. Chris was hunched over, clinging to the earth with his inferior hands and feet. Meanwhile the sky was changing, white rock fading to reveal grey clouds choked with smoke.

When Chris and Laki made camp for the night, they could see the ground be altered beneath their feet. It had been thick loam, of a sort that suited Laki's claws. But tendrils eased their way into the soil; leaving behind sand and rock and dust, all the colour of blood. When Laki tried to look directly at these tendrils, his eyes burned and they smelt *wrong*; was this infestation from Chris' superiors? These tendrils changed other things as well, in the distance Laki could see how the ground would bubble and fall away to reveal valleys that should have been carved over decades. When he looked to the now-clear sky, the stars themselves were different, the familiar patterns of the Rakundul Pack had been replaced with a constellation that Chris called Kasterborous.

When day came, it brought with it a sky that was entirely the wrong colour and held a second sun. A wind ruffled through Laki's feathers, bringing with it alien smells and the certainty that this was no longer their world. One of these smells was a searing scent of some strange metal. That was the first warning. The second was Chris bidding Laki to walk behind him. The final warning was seeing what he had thought to be a hill unfold itself into an iron colossus. It towered over Laki and Chris and boomed out a warning, one that suited Laki's eardrums perfectly well.

"Cwej-280567, you are going in the wrong direction for the dissolution camps." Laki didn't know it meant by dissolution camp but Chris remained impassive.

"I am on a separate assignment that requires this native, a Superior requested them for analysis."

"Where is your auth—" The colossus was pierced by a ruby ray that screamed out from a device held in Chris' hand. The shrill sound of that ray was nothing compared to the thud when all that metal fell to the earth. Laki realised that Chris must be a servant of the Gods as only they could create such potent weapons. Chris was striding away from the heap of metal only for something more than a voice to ring out. It was felt more than heard, the echoes of it rattling around in Laki's bones.

"Cwej-280567, why do you disobey your Superiors?" This was the voice of a God. Laki's nose was suddenly assaulted by the same smell that emanated from Chris' armour. It was somehow even more overpowering, every other smell was fully drowned out and it now had an almost soporific effect, as if it were demanding that Laki submitted to the reality it offered.

The God was standing across the plain from them where only a few moments before had been nothing. The robes of this God were the same colour as the orange sand that stretched between them, it almost looked like it was drenched with blood. A flat crest made of stars rose up from its shoulders and encircled its head. The God looked like it belonged, as though this were always its world and Laki was the intruder. Laki shook their head to try and dispel that sudden belief, they knew that this was the nostrils talking, not the brain. Chris went pale, then took in a sharp breath and

spoke to Laki, just loud enough to be audible.

"Take this." He pressed into Laki's talons an intricately patterned wedge of crystal. "Go to the city, find a grey cylinder, place this data crystal into a slot on the central console inside, then pull the lever next to the slot. That'll get you to safety." He paused and gave over his potent weapon as well. "If you meet anyone bearing my face, use the staser on them. You'll get more use out of it than I will. Go." With that last word hissed at them, Laki scurried away swiftly getting out of earshot of Chris' conversation with the God. But the God's voice never lessened in volume. The conversation lasted several minutes, and its patience sounded as though it was waning.

"Enough." Laki had to look back then, despite the distance they could see the God hold out a hand, apparently causing Chris to writhe in pain. First, the flesh was stripped away as if by invisible minuscule mouths, leaving the muscle and bone on full display. Then the muscle shrivelled up into nothingness, and the bones crumbled to dust. Chris was now just a web of veins and nerves unnaturally held upright. The hand clenched into a fist, and what was left of him crumpled up into a ball that then dropped into the dust. Laki turned and moved on, they couldn't let Chris' sacrifice be in vain. The day turned to night, and Laki judged that they had gotten far enough from the God to rest. But in the morning, they were awoken by a spectre.

"It's alright, I'm here to help. I'm not going to hurt you." Laki let out a snarl at that familiar voice. It sounded like Chris, it looked like Chris. But Laki couldn't bring themself to call it that so mentally named it Cwej. The next one was named Cwej too. And the next. Whenever a Cwej died, another would soon find Laki. And they did die, always within an hour or two of meeting Laki. Some got torn apart by unexpected side effects, others were simply shot down from afar. Cwej after Cwej after Cwej, all reciting the same rote script. All meeting swift deaths. Over and over and over and over.

The fourth of those was particularly notable. As even now, a few days after it had begun, the world was still changing. The ground would occasionally bubble, allowing mountains to rise up. Most of the peaks were blunt, only serving to strand anyone unlucky enough to be atop one as it rose. Most of them. Laki watched as the mountainside was bathed in a shimmering glow and they breathed in the smell of renewal and the Gods. It may not have been as potent as their weapons but this force that fountained out of the body had been a blessing from the Gods nonetheless. Laki kept walking, they had to reach that promised safety, no agent of the Gods would be able to convince them to turn aside.

The night after Laki left the mountains, something new came up to them. It didn't look like a Cwej, it was shorter and misshapen. Its head was covered in a thin layer of dark feathers rather than the typical gold. Nor did it wear the pungent armor that made it so easy to identify them. Instead, it wore robes that were largely blue with ever-shifting threads of gold interwoven into the garment. Laki chose to allow this stranger to join them in the warmth of the campfire that they were lying next to. The being attempted to make conversation with them but Laki chose not to respond, instead eying it warily. They didn't know what this new being was or what manner of trouble it could bring. Perhaps it was a different kind of divine servant, one that was more subtle. It did not remain subtle for long as it began to speak at just the right volume to be audible, it was clearly trying to provoke Laki.

"How did so many of my comrades fall to such a small being?" Laki remained silent, only shifting to ensure that they could grip the staser that was nestled beneath their body. "Ah, no matter. My Superiors must have simply chosen the wrong breed to send after you. The Cwej-Primes do possess the character defect of being soft-hearted."

"Are you a Cwej?"

"It speaks! I thought for a moment that you weren't sentient enough for even that. I suppose there's no harm in telling you. Yes, I am a Cwej. One tasked with ensuring your death." It drew a staser out of the folds of its robes. Laki acted on instinct then, as they darted forward, jaws clamping onto the Cwej's arm, and claws raking through its gut. They

held the body for several seconds as it folded over them, its last breath stuck in its throat. Clear liquid stained Laki's scales as it dribbled from the wound. This was but the first Cwej that would die so directly by Laki's claw as from now on every Cwej was hostile. Previously, they had been largely neutral as they wandered the desert but now they actively hunted Laki down. The spurt of not-wet transparent blood and the scorch of staser fire would become familiar sensations for Laki in the days to come.

In the end, Laki found the city. The dome of grey metal and glass protruded from the sands like an eye from its socket. It was empty and sterile, the Gods were not in their abode. Laki had little difficulty making their way through the corridors that criss-crossed the interior. They saw many intriguing sights such as a machine filled with hundreds of glimmering threads, the smell that came from it suggested that it was a cradle of the Gods. It would be petty to part those threads with their claws and blast the machine into scrap with the staser. Laki did find it undeniably satisfying however.

But finally, they managed to find a room filled with identical grey cylinders. The door was surprisingly easy to prise open. It led to a chamber that was larger than the previous room, truly a product of the Gods. The walls of this chamber were white with many circular indentations, they appeared to be made of chalk but when Laki trailed a talon along them, it didn't feel like any texture they had known before. The mushroom-esque structure in the centre was almost more visible olfactorily than visually, so strong was the scent that Laki had come to associate with the Gods and their works. Half-blinded by that overpowering smell, Laki scraped the crystal along the console until it entered the correct slot. They then pulled the lever next to the slot and with a thrum the machine threw itself into motion.

The white chamber remained static aside from the oscillating central column of the console but smells were roaring through it. The scent of the Gods became a minor note of an effervescent bouquet of constantly changing times and places. Laki could catch the scent of dusty halls in one moment, and in the next barren plains. Every moment in history had its own distinct scent and Laki could smell them all. But they were waiting for the right one. Worlds of endless oceans and dusty mountains passed before their nose. Then, there! They slammed the lever down at the smell of Home. It was not the same as the one they had known before; for their world was gone, killed by the Gods for some ineffable purpose. But it was similar enough that Laki knew they would be accepted among these people.

The machine stopped, the endless kaleidoscope of scents now static. It smelt natural unlike the perversion that the Gods had brought with them. They had not been worthy of Laki's belief, perhaps now Laki would find better Gods than the ones they had escaped. The wall ahead split in half whirring open to reveal a forest, the sight of green leaves and the scent of rain upon earth filtering in. Laki could smell new friends and ventured out to meet them. They were Home again.

ANY OTHER NAME

by Tara Lithops

The girl with no name awoke to a sunlit room and a hole in her head. The room was large, one bed, iron bedstead, dresser, window. Old-fashioned, she thought; and then wondered why. It wasn't like she could think of anything new-fashioned to compare it to. That was part of the hole. The girl couldn't think of any room other than this one. It was as if this was the only room in the world.

"Morning, Alice!"

The door burst open. The girl with no name started, tense, fight-or-flight.

"Sorry if I woke you," said the woman with the tea tray. "I've brought breakfast!"

The woman was called Sarah, and the town, it turned out, was called S____.

"Was there a crash?" Alice asked. She still felt tense, as though any minute the scene would descend into chaos. She kept scanning the room for hidden assailants, for sources of danger. She couldn't shake the feeling off.

Sarah looked confused. "Sorry?"

"Was I in a crash?"

"What do you mean, love?"

Alice paused. The word spaceship oated across her mind like a melody she couldn't quite place. She threw it away.

"No idea. Sorry. Confused."

"No problem." Sarah lay the tray of food across Alice's lap. She looked at her with infinite kindness. "You must be tired after your long journey. Here, have some breakfast. It's not been the same in S____ without you around."

Alice ate breakfast—which was ridiculously delicious—and left her room to explore. She was in a small stone inn. Sarah was wiping glasses in the bar when Alice made her way downstairs; more guests were having breakfast in the rooms beyond. "Sarah," she asked. "What do you mean, S____ isn't the same without me?"

"We've all missed you," Sarah said. "All your old friends. So sad your parents couldn't be here to see you return."

"Return?" Alice was nding the conversation hard to focus on. It slipped around her, like water around a stone. "Where did I go?"

"Oh, you poor dear," Sarah said. There was that in nite kindness again. "Don't exert yourself. It must have been terrible, your time away. But you're back home now."

Alice stood for a moment, unsure, trying to grasp something formless and faint. And then it was gone; and try as she might she couldn't remember what she had been worried about. After all, she was alright, wasn't she? She was home now.

The inn sat on a sunlit, cobbled road, lined with old stone houses, tall streetlamps and trees. It wound its way up a steep hill. Above, Alice could make out the the crown of a clock tower against the blue sky; below, she heard the sound of running water.

She followed the curve of the road down: through a crisscross of alleys and roads, across wide, broad avenues lined with gardens, over bridges crossing streams that sparkled and glimmered in the sun. As she walked, people she didn't know waved to her, or stopped to say hello, to tell her they had missed her, to welcome her home.

In a wide square, a marketplace hustled and bustled. Alice wandered through it in a daze. Clothes, spices, fruit and veg, strange musical instruments; the stalls were shaded by colourful fabrics, and the delicious smell of street food drifted through the air. A young woman smiled at her from behind a bookstall, and Alice smiled back.

All at once she realised she was happy. The sun; the town; the people. All of it so warm, so welcoming. That tension that had stalked her—that fight-or-flight—was gone.

"Ice-cream, love?"

She turned around. "Sorry?"

She had stopped in front of an ice-cream stall. The vender was peering at her. "What ice-cream d'you want?"

She shrugged. "Dunno. Whatever's best."

He scooped a mountain of multicoloured ice into a thick cone. "You'll like this one. It's an Ace special."

"Thanks." She took the cone. And then—

"Oh!" she realised. "I don't have any money."

"I'll pay," said a voice behind her.

She turned. It was the young woman from the bookstall. Warm, brown eyes, Alice thought.

"My treat, yeah?"

Alice found herself smiling again. "Cool! Thanks."

The young woman grinned. "No problem. I'm Katy. Good to meet you, Dorothy."

Dorothy and Katy ate ice-cream on a bridge above the river. They were on the edge of town. Across the river, green fields rippled in the wind.

"You don't know me, do you?" Dorothy asked. "It feels like everyone in this town knows me."

"I moved here last spring," said Katy. "I work in the library. I've heard of you. But no, I've never seen you before."

For some reason, that was a comfort.

"I grew up here," said Dorothy. "But I've been away for a while."

Exactly where she'd been, she still wasn't sure. But in the sun, eating ice-cream with Katy, it didn't seem to matter.

Katy's lunch hour was over too soon. "Come visit the library!" she said as they parted. "I'd love to see you again!" Dorothy absolutely didn't blush.

When Katy was gone, Dorothy set off across the river, to see S____ from a distance.

The town was on a hill; colourful stone houses in ramshackle piles, and above them all, the clock tower. The river twisted around the town. Surrounding it, bright green fields and meadows slowly gave way to thick forest.

There were no roads leading to or from S____. The town stood alone amongst the perfect countryside.

Dorothy returned to the inn. She was worried, again, about money; but Sarah told her she could stay as long as she chose. "Just for you, Alice," she said; and Alice smiled, although she couldn't quite say why.

S____ was a patchwork place, a tinker's heap of houses and streets. Tiny gardens and flowerbeds sprouted haphazardly in ragtag courtyards; yellow-brick alleys twisted in and around and back on themselves like strands of a knitted jumper. There were no shops, just the market that appeared in the main square every day, like clockwork. Alice ate street food, and wandered the town, and returned to the inn in the evenings.

And the weeks began to pass.

"Why'd you call me Dorothy?"

They were on the bridge above the river again. Ice-cream and sun.

Katy looked confused. "It's your name, isn't it?

"I don't know. Everyone else here calls me Alice."

"Through the Looking-Glass Alice?"

"I guess. Better than Dorothy, anyway."

"I don't know. Ordinary girl, swept away to a magical kingdom. It's the same story, isn't it? Just with different names."

"Hm," sniffed Alice/Dorothy. "S'pose."

A tiny, furry creature hopped along the water's edge. It cocked its head at the two of them. Like it was saying hello.

Katy shuffled closer to her on the bridge. "What do you want me to call you, then?"

Alice—the girl who might be Alice—sighed. "Dunno. Alice, Dorothy. They're both so—oh, y'know. Girly."

"And that bothers you?"

The girl who might be Alice shrugged.

"What should I call you, then?" Katy was leaning towards her. She felt their hands touch.

"I mean. You don't have to call me anything. If you don't want to."

Katy smiled. "I like that." And she kissed her.

Something was always happening in S____. Some evenings there was folk music in the market square; sometimes there would be a dance. Once, a cascade of the tiny, furry creatures invaded her room, and Dorothy/Alice and Sarah spent the whole afternoon chasing them out. Their miniature little faces were so funny—they looked so quizzical, so questioning, that she and Sarah laughed for weeks.

She was woken by the sun, every morning. It might rain in S____, it might hail—once it even snowed, but it was always sunny in the mornings. In the evening, the streetlamps would turn on, and bathe the town in soft golden light that never quite blocked out the stars. Sometimes Katy would rustle something up in her tiny rooms above the library, and they would eat by the yellow light of the streetlamps, and talk long into the night.

One day she decided to walk up the river that ran through the town, to see if she could find its source. She packed sandwiches in a bag and set off early with the sun, crossing green meadows, winding through deep woods, following the twists and turns of the river.

Morning gave way to afternoon, and she considered turning back. And then the river left the forest, and in front of her was S____ again.

She couldn't believe it. Perhaps it was another town that looked the same...? But as she approached she knew it wasn't. There was the bridge; there was the marketplace. There were faces she recognised.

The river didn't have a source; it owed into itself. Circling S____, in a loop.

They spent the evening in her room in the inn. The bedsheets were rumpled; it had been a good day.

Alice/Dorothy had recently visited the barber's in town, and had her hair cut close to the scalp. Katy was running her fingers through it gently. The sun was going down.

"Where did you live?" asked Alice/Dorothy. "Before you moved here. Where did you live?"

Katy didn't answer.

"Will you miss me?"

"What?" asked Katy.

"If I left town. Would you miss me?"

"Why would you leave?"

Alice/Dorothy turned to face Katy. "Please. Answer."

"Of course I would."

Alice/Dorothy groaned. "Don't say that. That makes it hurt. That makes it hurt so much."

"Why?"

"Because you're not real, are you?"

Katy looked confused. "What?"

"You're Oz." She didn't quite know what she was saying, but she couldn't stop the words from leaving her mouth. "Dorothy flies away from old sepia Kansas in a blur of tornado and has a marvellous time hotfooting it though Oz. Or Wonderland, or Narnia or wherever the hell.

"But it's not real, is it? She wakes in her bed back in Kansas at the end of the book and none of it was real. It was all a dream, and everything's the same as it was."

Katy looked hurt. "Just a dream?"

She was angry, now. "All of them. All those childish books. The magical kingdom, the happy ending—they're never real." She paused. "Aren't they?"

"Maybe." Katy shifted towards her on the bed. "But even so, that doesn't mean nothing changes, at the end of the book."

"What do you mean? Dorothy wakes up and it's all the same. Same old Kansas. Same old life."

"Or maybe she's changed."

"What?"

"Maybe she knows herself better, now. Maybe, thanks to Oz, she figured out who she was."

Dorothy/Alice was silent for a moment. She looked away, towards the window. Outside, the sun was setting over purple clouds. The streetlights were turning on. Artificial yellow light.

"Close your eyes."

"What?"

Katy smiled. "Close your eyes."

She closed her eyes.

She felt the gentle pressure of a kiss against her lips. Featherlight, like breath, like wind, like a whisper.

When she opened her eyes, Katy was gone.

She searched the inn before she left, as though Katy had pulled a magic trick and was hiding somewhere in its rambling rooms. But there was no-one to be found. No Sarah, no guests. No-one at all.

She returned to her room, and unscrewed a leg off the iron bedstead. She took it with her as she left.

The town was completely empty. Nobody laughing or talking, no music, no market. Nothing. As she walked, the streetlamps began to dim. One by one, as she passed them. Silent. She turned around. The lamps behind her were dimming, too. Then they were gone. The city was dark and blue around her, like a clock winding down.

The lamps ahead of her still shone. All the way to the top of the hill. Lighting the way.

Somehow, in all her wanderings, she had never visited the clock tower before. The streetlamps led her right to it. The top of the hill. No windows, just a door, and the clock at the top of the tower. Ticking. It was the only sound she could hear.

The door swung open under her touch, and she stepped onto the spiral staircase. Behind her, the last streetlamp went out.

She turned. Behind her, the town was pitch black. She couldn't see S___ at all. She felt that if she walked back out, there would be nothing there; the town would be gone, like a sandcastle after the tide.

She closed the door behind her.

The ticking of the clock followed her all the way up.

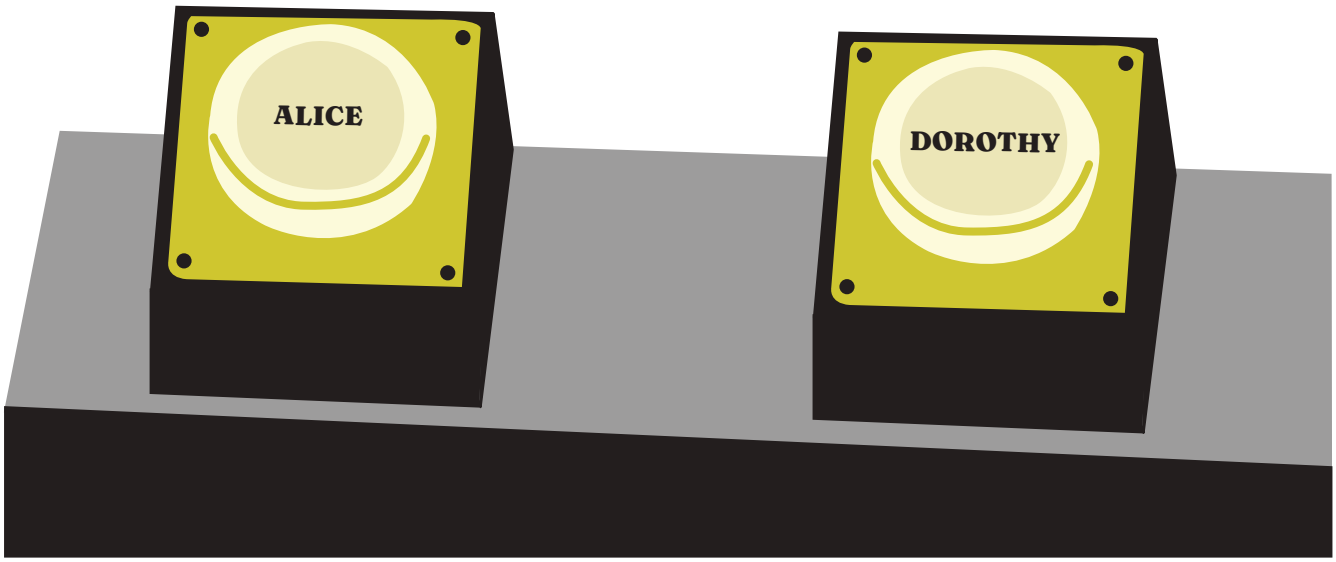
At the top of the staircase was another door. She braced herself, raised the iron bedstead, and—

No-one. Just a room. Black walls. The ever-present ticking sound. And in front of her—on a blank, wooden table—two buttons.

ALICE *DOROTHY*

One or the other.

As simple as that.



Alice/Dorothy looked at the buttons that bore her names. She looked at the dark, empty space between them.

She weighed the iron pipe in her hands. It wasn't a baseball bat, but it'd do.

She brought the pipe down hard.

The table splintered and snapped beneath her. She brought the pipe down again. The two buttons, Alice, Dorothy, shattered. She spun the pipe around again.

The world broke in two.

The dark room shattered like glass. Splinters of blackness showered all around, like water, like a mirror, as she lashed out again and again with the pipe. She broke the world into a million pieces, and—

—and what was that? Behind the darkness? She stepped forward.

The girl who was neither Alice nor Dorothy stepped into a room soaked in light. A huge console blossomed in the middle of the room.

Artificial light, she thought. Artificial white light. As white as ice-cream. There was a small man hunched over the console. When he saw her, his face lit up.

"There you are! I've been looking everywhere for you. I've been worried."

"Good to see you too, Doctor," she said.

The man by the console rearranged his features like pieces of a jigsaw. "I've told you a hundred times. It's Professor. Not Doctor."

The girl without a name smiled. "Alright. *Professor*." She paused. "Is that who you are now, then?"

"For now." The Professor looked up at her. Warm eyes in a clown's face. "It's not the name that matters, A—"

He stopped himself. Cocked his head. He looked like a mouse or a squirrel, like one of those small furry creatures she had chased out of her bedroom, back in—huh. Funny. She couldn't remember where.

"It's not the name that matters," the Professor was saying. "It's what you do with it."

He winked. She could have sworn his eyes actually, literally sparkled.

"Of course, you have to choose a good name to do something with. Don't you think?"

The girl who was neither Alice nor Dorothy smiled. "Ace."

BENNY'S 7

EPISODE 1: THE WAY IN

by A.C.E. Lewendon

Benny throws back another pint. This guy can go on for ages. But she thinks she's almost got him to loosen his tongue. She feels her head swimming. She got him to at least admit he's working with the underground, which is something she already knew he and his fellow crew mates were doing.

"And then, and then! I can't tell." He takes another swig of his drink.

"Come on, you can tell me."

"I'm sorry, I really can't."

"If you tell me, if you tell ME, I'll get you another drink." Benny gives her best roguish grin really hoping this'll work and really dreading tomorrow morning. He tilts his head to the side, considering it. Finally she has him. "Bartender, another of the same for me and my friend here." The Bartender puts another two pints of the strange greenish drink down in front of them.

The man takes a deep drink, "Well alright then, but you need to keep it a secret. Can't let the Federation find out. Promise me you'll never speak of this."

Benny gives a nod and lets out a vague and slurred vow of solemn silence.

"Well, the Federation have this big computer outpost. Loads of big bombs and guns and, well you get the idea. Tomorrow at 12 we're gonna hit it big and blow it up. Just me and the rest of the crew."

"You've not told the local Resistance?"

"No, we think the Federation have a mole on the inside."

Ah so that's why they couldn't find out what they were up to. They already guessed at the plan. "A mole? What makes you say that?"

"Now that I can't tell you. Not even for another drink. It's my head on the line and I'm rather attached to it, despite some insulting comments." And with that he stands and walks from the bar. Well she may not have found out why they suspect the infiltration but she's got the time and that's what's important. A loud boom rocks the bar. Whilst people scramble to the window to see what's happened Benny gives a little smile and pours the rest of her drink on the sticky floor boards, real wood; sounds like Ace is having just as much success as she is.

Above the planet a great Ship hides in the radio shadow of a plutonium asteroid. "So you managed to not become completely inebriated." Avon turns to look Villa right in the face.

"Better than that, I've managed to get them and any federation soldiers pulled into a trap. They think the attack is tomorrow at 12."

"And they'll walk right into it. With them captured, we'll be able to root out the mole."

"Speaking of that, how did you find out local Resistance had been infiltrated?"

"Ah, well, you see that's not something you need to worry about." Avon gives Villa a rather unsettling smirk.

"Somehow that just makes me worry more."

"I wouldn't know."

"Wicked." Ace looks up at the plume of fire coming out of the Federation records office with a look of awe on her face, "Oi scumbags over here!" She lobs a large rock at a nearby Federation Officer. He and his squad turn to run after her. She grins and darts of down an alleyway. The Federation Officer is yelling at her to stop. She slips round a corner just as two shots rip into the brick work as the Federation Troopers open fire. She swings round the next corner and runs straight into a dead end. The Federation Officer and his Guard come round the corner.

Seeing her predicament, they slow to a walk, "Hands up. It's time for you to pay little lady." Ace raises her hands as the officer comes up to her with a rather nasty grin on his face. He puts

the barrel of the gun right under her chin "Now then, you've got options..."

"Oh shut up, I've heard it all before," The officer looks taken aback by her remark. "And who are you calling a lady!" The officer drops his gun as Ace's knee collides with an unfortunately unarmoured area of his body. The troopers open fire; however before they can land a hit, Ace has already been pulled into the air and over the wall.

"I was wondering when you were going to pull me over, leaving it a little late aren't we?"

"Well, what can I say, I really wanted to see the oaf neutered." Dayna smiles warmly at her new friend. For the past few weeks she and Ace had gotten to really know each other really well with the Liberator crew working with Ace's Resistance cell. Ace smiles deeply back.

"That explosion was real ace."

"Well I hope it was. Your Nitro Nine was what made it possible."

"But without your delivery system we would have gone up in flames along with the records office." Ace lets out a laugh as the adrenaline runs its course.

Dayna pulls Ace to her feet and helps her dust off the brick dust.

"Come on, let's get going."

"Ahh Madam President, how good to see you." The little man smiles up at President Servalan, the most powerful woman in the Galaxy, "I am so pleased to see that you have weathered that attack from those despicable terrrrorists."

"I have weathered plenty of attacks from these particular terrorists, Doctor Smith." Servalan reaches down and places a finger under Doctor Smith's chin. "So you say you've got something for me? May I see it?"

"Ahhh yes, of course Madam President, for you and only you I give the ultimate code breaker. With this you'll be able to decode any rebel codes."

"Any codes Doctor Smith?"

"Any codes Madam President."

"Why Doctor Smith if I had known someone with your talents a few years back, the Federation would still be at the height of its power." Servalan looks down at the little man standing opposite her, a look of curiosity hidden by an air of superior disinterest.

"Yes it would."

"I have been told that it took you only four months to create this from scratch. So Doctor Smith, where were you before that?"

"Prior to the Galactic War, Madam President, I was but a simple traveller going from one world to another but all that destruction made me realise that the Galaxy needed defending from genocidal maniacs."

"And so you joined the Federation scientific corps. Well Doctor Smith I am sure I can say that we are all very happy with this development. I will watch your career with keen interest. You may now leave."

"Thank you Madam President." The little man nods his head towards the ruler of over ten thousand systems and leaves.

"With very keen interest, indeed, Doctor." Servalan taps a small button on her desk. "Chancellor, would you be so kind as to keep an eye on Doctor Smith?"

The smooth and refined tones of the Chancellor of the Internal Security Office drift through the intercom. "Why of course Madam President I would be delighted to. In fact I already have several eyes on him right at this moment."

Ace returns to the Headquarters of local Resistance group, an old abandoned warehouse on the edge of the city. For the past few months, she has been carefully infiltrating them in an attempt to stop them attacking a specific government installation. However according to the information from Benny, the attack is still going ahead. If the Liberator Crew had not shown up she would have been able to delay the attack until after the Doctor's plan had reached fulfilment. Whatever that plan is.

She sits down with the rest of her rebels. She, like the rest of them, is waiting to hear what's planned for the assaults on the installation. What she has managed to gather is that it's some kind of Federation Relay Centre and that by destroying it, they would cripple Federation communication over this sector. Why the Doctor wanted to stop it being blown to kingdom come is beyond her, but he probably has a good reason for it. Probably. Well, Hopefully he does, thinks Ace, because if he doesn't then she's going to bash his kneecaps in.

A rippling in the air and a strange thrumming noise heralds the appearance of Dayna, the representative of the Liberator Crew in this Rebel Cell. Ace waits and listens as Dayna outlins her plan to destroy the facility. Ace makes sure to pay specific attention to Dayna's description of the explosive devices she plans to use to destroy the installation. Using this information she will be able to get Benny to place a signal blocking device within the Installation and stop the bombs detonating. After the meeting concludes Ace sneaks out of the warehouse and into a side alley. Waiting for her in the shadows is her accomplice in crime, Bernice Summerfield.

"Watcha Benny." Ace grins over at her friend.

"I'm not doing so good, truth be told." Benny's voice is marred by worry and concern. Ace instinctively tenses up and reaches for a captured Federation handgun.

"I wouldn't do that if I were you." A snide voice comes from behind as Avon steps out from behind Benny, his gun pointed directly towards her. Ace turns to run only to find the alley behind her blocked by a woman with dark curly hair wielding the same kind of gun as Avon, Cally.

"Oh cruk!" Ace raises her hands as she's taken back to the warehouse and locked up with Benny.

A day later, the sound of cheering fills Ace and Benny's ears. It is abundantly clear that the installation they were trying to stop being destroyed has been destroyed. They have failed in their mission. The door to their makeshift cell opens and in walks Avon with Cally and Tarrant. "So, you're spies? I had hoped better from you Ace." Avon smirks at his prisoners.

"What gave us away." said Ace.

"Well your friend over here made the unfortunate mistake of underestimating Villa. She was very unsubtle with her line of questioning, Villa may be an alcoholic but he is not as stupid as he seems, unlike you two. Now once I figured this out and added on the fact that one of my informants had told me the rebel cell had been infiltrated, all I had to do was have Cally here follow you, and you lead us right to traitors in our midst." The corner of Avon's mouth curls. "Now the question is, what do we do with you? Now, the rebels outside say we should just kill you and toss your bodies in the river, but I think that you'll want to live, so maybe you will tell me all about your little Federation spy networks and I might just give you what you want."

"We won't tell you anything scumbag!" Ace spits on the ground in front of Avon.

"Yeah, what she said." Benny adds.

Avon looks like he is about to reply when suddenly his wrist communicator bleeps. "Yes Villa what is it?" The sound of a reply comes back through the communicator. "We'll be right up." Avon lowers his wrist "Cally, apparently our informant has some information for us. Tarrant, you stay here with Dayna and keep an eye on these spies to find out what you can." With that Avon and Cally both teleport out.

Almost as soon as the sound of the teleport fades, the sound of gunfire erupts from the

warehouse outside. Tarrant darts through the door only to fall back, stunned by a blast to the shoulder. After a few seconds the sound of gunfire vanishes, the door to the cell bursts open. Standing there are several Federation Troopers. The leader points to the unconscious Tarrant and two of the troops drag him away.

The officer then turns to Ace and Benny. "We have been sent to liberate you, it would not do for heroes of the Federation to end up butchered by freaks like these."

Ace and Benny look at each other in surprise.

After coming too, Tarrant and Dayna find themselves seated in a small white room, inside of which is naught but a desk and an oddly dressed little man. "Hello, I am the Doctor and these are my friends..." The man makes a noise of discontent upon realising his friends aren't here. "Well, anyway, you have ruined months of careful planning and preparation. Do you know how much I've risked?" The Doctor looks away, his eyes cast in shadow, "I didn't think so."

"Risked? What have you risked! You are a servant of the Federation, just another corrupt madman. Why have you left us alive, Doctor?" Tarrent stands, his youthful face and tall, strong yet slender body towering over the Doctor.

"Just the Doctor, and I am hardly a servant of the Federation. I am the Doctor, the Ka Faraq Gatri, the Oncoming Storm, Merlin, I am Fate's Accomplis and Time's Champion and if it was not for you it would have been in ruins by the end of the day."

"Now those are some impressive titles but why should we believe you?" Dayna swivels in her chair and puts her feet on the Doctor's desk.

"Well Dayna, it all started some months ago, when me and my travelling companions arrived on this little world. I realised, with the Federation damaged after the war, the time for its downfall was now. And so I sent Ace to guide the local Resistance groups to help free this world and sent Benny to keep tabs on the goings on. However when Ace told me that you had arrived I realised something was wrong."

The Doctor looks darkly out of the window. "Someone was messing with established history; you were supposed to be half a galaxy away. And then you and your crew took control of the local Resistance, most unlike your current leader. But things started coming together when your Resistance group starts targeting installations vital to my plans. You have a benefactor don't you? Someone telling you where to hit these places. Places which if they still existed would have by now released an unstoppable computer virus that would have completely destroyed the federation in two years. So who is the one manipulating you? Don't tell me it's a small dark man with a goatee?"

"No" Tarrent replies. "It's..."

"Braxiatel!" Benny yells upon being escorted to the office of the Chancellor of the Internal Security Office.

"Yes, who did you expect?" Braxiatel, as ever dressed immaculately in a crisp black suit. "A power mad man with a goatee? No, this is my doing."

"Well you should start explaining yourself, scumbag, before I come over there and beat it out of you."

"I think that should wait until the Doctor pays me a visit." Someone knocks on the door three times. "Ah that should be him."

The Doctor pushes down the door, Tarrent and Dayna on either side of him, his face darkened by rage and indignation. As he storms toward Braxiatel, it's almost as though he has grown three feet. "Braxiatel. Your schemes have always been needlessly complicated and immoral. But this time you have gone too far! Aiding the Federation? Arguably the most nasty

and villainous government since the Daleks."

"And it's nice to see you too, aren't you pleased to see your old br-"

"I am not. Explain yourself, this kind of meddling is a crime against all that is good."

"Well you see Doctor, the Federation must survive, so that after few more wars it can be reorganised into the Earth Empire. In this empire a child will be born by the name of Shvay. He can only exist if the Earth Empire comes to be. Eventually from him a whole race will be born, a race of utmost importance to our people in the coming war?"

"There will be no war, Brax."

"So you say. But you did ask me to explain myself."

"And explain yourself, you did." Servalan enters the room, flanked by several guards. "Two traitors for the price of one, and a pity. I had really hoped for more from you Doctor. Ah Dayna, I would not do that if I were you, especially if you don't want Ace and Tarrent to go the same way as your dear father." Dayna is restrained by two guards after attempting to attack Servalan.

"Ah Madam President as you can see I was merely tr-"

"I'd be quiet if I were you Chancellor Braxiatel; aiding rebels? I think that would make you an Ex-Chancellor at the very least, if not a terrorist yourself." Servalan smirks, "I think I will enjoy killing you the most, unfortunate that Avon could not be here to see the death of yet more of his comrades." Servalan raises a small pistol and pointed it towards Braxiatel. Gunfire fills the room.

"So, I may not be able to enjoy their deaths, but I am here, my dear Madam President." Avon gives a rakish grin as Cally and Villa step over the bodies of the Federation Trooper. Sevalan lowers her pistol as yet another one of her schemes are foiled by the roguishly attractive Avon.

"Ah Avon, how nice to see you." Braxiatel steps forward to greet him only to take a step back when Avon points his gun at him.

"So clearly you don't know where Blake is, and you just wanted to save the Federation to help in some entirely hypothetical war. You set us up?"

"Yes, I did but you have to understand I-"

"I don't have to understand anything, you betrayed us."

Avon raised his gun and pointed it directly at Braxiatel's face.

"Do you think he will shoot him?" The client asks.

"It doesn't really matter, the trust is broken, the pieces have been put into play, the plan can't be stopped now." Carnell turns to look at his client, an odd person dressed in red robes with a collar which, had the man been younger, would have made him look like a serpent but as it was it just made him look ridiculous.

"Humm. Well I would prefer it if he survived but at this point it's hardly important if he lives or dies."

The client and Carnell turn and look at the screen on which the Doctor has caused Avon and his crew's weapons to short out using his sonic screwdriver. After a short scuffle between Dayna and Ace, one which had left Ace looking longingly over her shoulder, they had fled, their flight covered by the arrival of several Federation troops who forced the Liberator Crew to teleport back to their ship.

"Now then, when will I be receiving my payment?" Carnell turned to look at his client and somehow got the feeling that he had been just as used, as those he was psycho-manipulating.

"Your ship and enough Kaldorian currency to get you started again can be found just outside. I do believe you will do very well for yourself on Kaldor."

Carnel stands and thanks his client before leaving to head to his new destination.

"Very well indeed. And the Black Bishop has been set on the board and so the plan can begin." And the client fades into the background.

It's a representation of human conflict.
A metaphor.
For something bigger than itself.

KERRY, THE SUITCASE AND THE FACE OF GOD

by Jennifer Still

Imagine, if you will, a suitcase. The size, how it opens and how it locks, none of that matters. Whatever you are picturing in your mind right now, that's exactly the suitcase I want you to picture.

Spend some time imagining the suitcase. The curves of it, or lack thereof; The weight of it in your hands; The handle; picture everything you could possibly imagine about this suitcase.

Now, answer me one question.

What's inside it?

I know what's inside the suitcase. Do you?

They say the war will never end.

It stretches across time, infesting our future.

They say that tomorrow is decided for us. Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow will come and the war will still happen. A war in a dimension we can never hope to see nor understand. Perhaps they've already bombed the shit out of tomorrow, and I'll die, and that'll be it. Or... that was it, I guess.

Maybe in a few days I'll have been dead for years. Who knows.

The lesser species call it a "War in Heaven". They see something they don't understand and they blame it on Gods and monsters, fighting in the sky. Perhaps they're right. To a lesser species, a species that can manipulate the laws of time... maybe we may as well be Gods to them.

Kerry Leanne Mortimer didn't know when she'd acquired the suitcase. It was just... something. It was something that lived in the corner of her room, silently waiting for her to open it.

She didn't know what was in it. She wanted to, of course, but no matter how hard she tried, she couldn't put a dent in the thing. She'd thrown it out, tried to give it away, broken down and screamed her lungs out as she thrashed it against the wall, but the next day it was still there. The same suitcase, perpetually haunting her cramped little room.

> *"In its most basic form, a retcon is any plot point or detail that was not intended from the beginning, but treated as if it always had been. The most preferred use is where it contradicts nothing, even though it was changed later on. An ideal retcon clarifies a question alluded to without adding excessive new questions."*
>
> - "Retcon" - TVTropes.com

I call to order this meeting of the Great Houses of Gallifrey, to determine the nature of the threat against our world.

Not the nature of The Enemy as we know it, but the true Enemy. The force that lurks behind it. Something great and terrible is manipulating this war. All signs point to something that has been active in this universe since before the time of Rassilon, but the Matrix is blind to it.

We are the oldest civilization in the universe. The most powerful civilization in the universe.

There are things out there beyond the understanding of any mortal, but we have tamed them. We fought the Yssgaroth and pierced the hearts of a thousand gods. We have complete mastery over time.

We must identify this force before its plans come to pass.

I told you, the suitcase fixes itself.

Don't fuck with me. You've sewn the tear back together.

No, like. Look at it, Katie. There's no marks on it at all.

You bought a new suitcase then.

No, I didn't, I swear. It just fixes itself somehow. Every night. I wake up and the fucking suitcase is here in the morning.

...

Try the lock. Try get it open.

...

...

Fine.

...

It's... wait. Hold on.

I don't know what's inside.

Girl, just—hold on.

You get it though, right? Like you just can't get it open. You can keep trying, it's not gonna work.

...Huh.

Throw it at the wall or whatever. It doesn't open. You can scratch it and stuff, but like, it just fixes itself.

What the fuck?

I ask myself every day when the war will end. Would I even notice if it did, or would I simply awake one morning to a peaceful world, the friends I've lost alive again and me none the wiser?

Have I even lost friends in the war, or was I always this alone?

Was I always the only person manning this outpost?

I've taken to walking around the corridors and just thinking. There's nothing else to do here. Perhaps part of me thinks that if I spend enough time wandering around or if I walk with enough purpose and enough speed, I'll come up with some great breakthrough about the nature of the war. I'll figure out exactly what our Enemy is and why the Great Houses don't want to tell us. I'll remember some great missing link in the history of our universe, wiped out by the war, and everything will all fall into place.

I'm lonely here.

Perhaps someday some stray year used as ammunition will graze past my time stream, and I'll have always had someone to keep me company.

This is Temporal Lieutenant Kerraleyianna of House Mortivast, signing off.

Have you heard of the Young World Theory? It's an interesting little thing, posited by Gallifreyan scholars. It's often ignored completely in wider War-time discourse, but remains one of the most compelling arguments made in our time.

I'm sure you've heard of this example that people use to explain higher dimensions. There's a two-dimensional man in a two-dimensional box. Anybody experiencing the world in three dimensions would tell him to simply step forward and leave the box, but to our two-dimensional friend, this is entirely impossible. He is trapped, purely because he cannot conceive of a third dimension. His mind is simply not built to do so.

Now, the Young World Theory asks of us a very similar question, a question that allows us to see, just for a moment, the confines of our very own two dimensional box.

Why is it that no matter how much science improves on Gallifrey, on Skaro, on any civilised and technologically advanced planet, that

science is always conceivable and understandable to the mind of a 21st Century Human?

What would you do if you saw the face of God?

Is everything alright? You look awful.

I unlocked the suitcase.

Are you serious?

Yeah, come see.

One moment, babe, I'm eating.

Katie, come on.

Okay, fine. Sure. What's inside?

Don't know yet. Haven't opened it. I feel like we should do it together.

Together?

I'm not sure, I don't know. I feel like...

...?

I opened it so easily. It's not like I won, like, like I didn't open it myself but it like, let me open it.

Huh?

It's like, uh, I guess whatever plans the suitcase has, it's like, ready.

The suitcase has plans?

Or... I don't know. Something else? God? Don't laugh at me.

Kerry, you're being a little crazy, I'm sorry. I'm serious.

Fine. Let's go look inside. It's probably just clothes anyway.

I call to order this meeting of the Great Houses of Gallifrey in complete secrecy. We have made a breakthrough regarding the identity of the forces behind the war. We have seen the face of our Gods. The Enemy is no longer our primary priority.

A new war is about to begin. This information must not leave this room. We do not have much time.

I'm sorry, Miss Mortimer. There's no record of anyone by the name of Katie Bennet ever having been enrolled at Bournemouth.

That's okay. I didn't think there would be.

If there's somebody impersonating a student, that must be reported immediately to campus security.

No, no. I just... remembered the name. I think. I don't know. I'm sorry for wasting your time.

I know why the war will never end.

I did it, I paced through these corridors for hours upon hours until I finally figured it all out. One little epiphany and all the secrets of the Great Houses came to me. I know why this station is so big, so empty. I know why I feel so lonely all the time.

I know why the war is happening. I know who's behind the war.

I wish I didn't. I wish I could close whatever box I've just opened and go back to pacing the corridor endlessly and wondering. I understand why the Great Houses are keeping these secrets... because it's not The Enemy we should be scared of. It's the people behind it.

I can't live with this knowledge.

I'm going to take my own life. Open the airlock and flush myself out into the universe. To everyone, all the people of this universe, if you can even call it that, I wish you luck. I hope you never find out why you're here.

This is Temporal Lieutenant Kerraleyianna of House Mortivast, signing off.

There is a house in Bournemouth, about five minutes walk from the seafront, with no occupants.

It's a student house, or at least it looks like it from the front. It's not the sort of thing you particularly look at closely. Nobody's ever lived there, at least, not since the landlord bought it a few years ago.

Perhaps it's a good thing nobody lives there. There's nobody to disturb the suitcase that sits in the corner of the leftmost room on the top floor.

Of course, until today.

Today, the suitcase is gone. Today, there never was a suitcase.

Ollie Davis lives in that room now. He hasn't cleaned the floor in a few weeks, and there's vomit stains on the toilet seat from a few too many rough nights out. It's been that way for months.

Every so often, he finds something in his room he doesn't recognise. A memory of someone else's life. Just more shit he needs to throw away.

I call to order this meeting of the Great Houses of Gallifrey in complete secrecy. Tomorrow, we start our final assault against the forces behind the war.

We may not exist for much longer.

One day, the war will end.

The war will end, and nobody will notice. The universe will go about a new day with new people living new lives, histories unshaped by the carnage that would have come to be.

That's not enough for you, though. You want to know what was inside the suitcase.

Perhaps you already have a guess, a headcanon, some explanation to keep your mind from fixating on it. I don't care.

What is important is that I know what's inside the suitcase. The world will keep turning, and you'll keep on wondering, but I know. I know this because I wrote it.

The Great Houses realised this too.

The war ended before they could do anything about it. The universe must move on.

What would you do if you saw the face of God?

What if that God decided you had to die?

I'll leave the Great Houses to their war for now. There is far worse to come.

HOW TIME HAS TICKED A HEAVEN ROUND THE STARS

by Molly Warton

Twice in the knowledge of her failing she had fallen.

Twice she had leapt the gaps in the paths outside the world and missed the dark shape that was the other side, falling further and deeper into the blackness.

This, then, was the final road.

She ran, faster than the world, tears pooling in her stomach and tripping her up as she shut her eyes from the world and stumbled through the deep layered darkness in the underbelly of reality.

There was water in the air, or perhaps there was air in the water.

It made little difference.

Never, never, never.

Never go away.

Never sink into the final darkness.

Never fall from the grace of reality.

Why did you have to go? she said.

There was a wall of tears between her and the world. She leapt through the night, but missed the thought.

Her memories dragged her back, and she tried to leap but was caught on the hollow of existence between the ledge and the gap by their hooks.

Why were the stars so beautiful? Why could she not reach them?

The stars were fighting in their dreams, with ideas of coagulating stuffy bleakness. There was nothing in the stars but rot. How many times had she walked across the stars, thinking of rising from the emptiness left behind by Lilith's maw? How many times had they walked?

The water was filled with life; dark, creeping things that whispered round the shadows, round and round 'till the day went down and left them weeping in nothing but that which they once knew but now would never come again.

Her name was Justine. She knew that much, at least.

She was the last.

This place was not real, simply something half on the edge of the mind, nothing but an idea.

That only made it more dangerous.

The stars smelt of smoke and drugs and death. They shone like the world and danced in the heart of reality. They were clumsy, and reality was fragile. Alas.

War was so hard. But there had never not been the War. It has always been there. Except back when it hadn't.

Death was the only thing that remained, but she clung to the tenderness of hope even as it bruised in her grasp, falling apart like the skin of a watermelon.

She felt as if she should feel worse, but she didn't. Her heart was bleeding, blood weeping from its woven carapace in white and red and black. The water was cool against her face, but rang in her ears like the screaming of a thousand souls.

She ran.

Run away, little girl, run as fast as you can, but you can never escape it. Over the gashes in the dusty path she leapt. They took her and they laid her out and they squeezed her mind until it could scarce breathe, and they wrought her life from its moorings and shattered it on the floor of eternity. Just like they did to everyone else.

Poor Eliza. Pretty eyes, laughing eyes, eyes that tore your soul in two and made your heart tumble over itself.

The tears of her heart mingled with the tears of the sky on her cheeks. She was laughing into the wine at her lips.

The monster smiled across the table.

"Would you like some salt with that?" he asked, gesturing at her food.

She laughed merrily, and blood tumbled out of her mouth.

How beautiful the stars were. How they burnt.

There was a puddle of glistening turquoise that fell away into the night, glowing even as it dropped into the darkness. Justine stepped over it gingerly, between the dark brown stones on one side and the sodden dirt on the other.

She knew that it was right, but she walked away from it because she couldn't

couldn't

couldn't

It was so cold.

There was nothing in her heart but ice and vacuous sorrow, clenching to the breadth of the past with charred hollow wailing limbs.

A cry caught in her throat as she leapt and fell—there was nothing between her mind and the sodden solemn moss-smelling earth—and the water came to meet her.

The moment hung in space, lasting a brief eternity as she fell. It was nothing and it was everything. She knew that it was nothing but that which she thought it was, but it meant the world to her and she drifted into the black waters with the heart that was her ball and chains.

Everything looked so strange from beneath the water. She could see nothing, but everything was laid before her eyes. She could not breathe, but breathing was never all that important in the grand scheme of things. Life was an inconvenience. But it was everything.

She couldn't think. Why couldn't she think? When had she last thought of anything? This was very silly, she thought, irritably.

Her heart beat between her breasts. It rocked her body with its convulsions, pulsing life through her veins. What a strange sensation it was! She was carried by its beating through the water.

Through the tears in her eyes and the blackness of the water she could see the stars below her, all the heavens laid out in their graces. Their War was between entropy and logic, dreams and mundanity, the ego and the rational self.

A war of binaries.

Stupid, pitiful things. Urizen's children were so stifling and boring, and their Enemy not much better.

Tsk tsk.

Her heart broke in two and her tears fell through the cradle of the night.

There was light all around her and a voice gently calling her name.

"Justine," said the portly woman with the face that was all dimples, "You were out like a light there, dear. Tsk. Well, I've some porridge on the stove, and we'll see what else things'll come to now, eh?"

"Thank you," said Justine to the kind woman who leant over her, and gave her a small smile.

The woman headed off, and Justine got up and looked out of the window and saw the stars above and below and to all sides, then sighed and went off to join the dream-world of the living.

REPORT OF DR. JOHN H. HOLMES REGARDING THE RED-HANDED LEAGUE

A.F. 149, CASE #2495784329421

by Louis Peacock

Report of Dr. John H. Holmes Regarding The Red-Handed League A.F. 149, Case #2495784329421. As I begin these reflections I believe it behooves my position as the new Head Case Archivist of the Agency to introduce myself. I am John Horatio Holmes (neé Watson), replacing Ms. Mycroft Adler, who has recently taken up residence with her creator, a Mr. George Ganymede of the 31st century Terran Mining Corporation Moon colony.

I am the current husband of Mr. Sherlock Holmes (#22894 I believe) of the Great Detective Agency, both of us having been created by a 21st century woman by the name of Maria who, to my recollection, wrote a series of short fiction pieces which gave us our life on an Old Internet web-site, whose name is unfortunately unknown to me. I do believe it to have been an archive of such works, however, and certainly one which has lent life to many like my husband and myself, and I am therefore most grateful to it and to dearest Maria for granting me and my beloved our lives.

My husband and his colleagues have entrusted me with the role of Head Case Archivist, and I advise any future readers to take note of this being my first case recording, and indeed perhaps one of the most important ones I may make. With that, I believe it time to commence the terrifyingly titillating tale of the Agency's recent encounters with the organisation known only as the Red-Handed League.

It had been, as I recall, a rather slow day at the office before the Mr. Holmes with the cybernetic eye and the Mr. Mycroft Holmes with the shockingly athletic build and strong resemblance to a 21st century television writer from Teletopia of my acquaintance came bursting through the doors to the Head Office. My husband, as befitted his heroic and boundlessly compassionate personality, was the first to help the winded duo to a seat to allow them to begin to recount their tale, one which they promised was the veritable paragon of the strange and bizarre.

They had been assigned to a minor jewelry theft case in the Chi Rho district, mostly assigned to our organisation due to the wealth of the victim rather than the actual severity of the crime as I understand it. The villa in which the victim lived was found almost entirely intact, save for an expertly picked lock and an entire drawer of missing jewelry, indeed so neatly taken were they and so nimbly hidden was the fact of their absence that the victim, a M. Richelieu, had not noticed their absence for three entire days.

What gave our colleagues such a fright, and what has spurred the creation of this very document, was a small envelope left in the now empty drawer. Or rather, it would have been empty, were it not for the veritable panoply of criminal calling cards that had been stuffed into it.

Chess pieces, monocles, gloves, plumed hats, sealed letters, personal monograms, lace hearts, playing cards, video game cartridges, half a dozen spoons, a scarlet pimpernel, two rapiers, a jeweled tortoise shell, several dozen piece of silver, a stuffed parrot, and a large colony of live spiders had all been squeezed into the drawer, accompanied by a letter in a purple envelope done in at least thirty separate handwritings calling upon the Agency to chase after their organisation further, for it would be most amusing for us to fail to catch the newly founded Red-Handed League (named, so the letter said, for the one thing they would never be caught as being).

The letter and its sender quickly caused a great deal of hubbub around the Head Office. This organisation purported to be a large-scale criminal ring, and yet it had somehow escaped our notice that it had been founded, especially so recently. This surely is what gave our two colleagues such a fright, and which immediately steeled our resolve to go after these fiends as

soon as another case which may have involved them were to present itself.

Another case presented itself exactly three months later. A report concerning a concerning amount of calling cards found in place of the rather pricey mosaics of a wealthy resident of the Romuline District immediately sent every detective in the Agency into a furor, all clamoring to be put on the case and finally pursue something truly unknown to us. Eventually a crack team of our finest detectives was assembled to crack this most vexing case. Among the first to be picked was, naturally, my husband, whose keen intellect and sabre-sharp deduction skills were remarkable even among those of our number. He immediately donned his finest Inverness cape and deerstalker, and gave me a glorious kiss on the cheek and, with that typically beautiful half-smile of his, bade me come along with him to record this most fascinating case.

For company we had brought several dozen of our finest investigators, drawn from all areas of expertise and eras, as it was immediately apparent that the full force of the Agency would be necessary to bring down these fiends. Upon arrival at the house of our client, who appeared immediately to be a Senator of some repute, a man by the name of Marcus Cassius, it became immediately apparent that we were not alone.

Already in the driveaway the thick Russian brough of Mr Holmes (Livanov) could be discerned shouting in his rather poor French over a clamour of sophisticatedly polite sounding replies in far more passable French. Mr. Holmes (Livanov), along with his assigned partner detective Ms. Futaba, were to have arrived early to convene with Mr. Cassius and ascertain the nature of his recent troubles. As soon as my husband, our companions, and I rounded the corner it became immediately apparent that they had gotten more than they had bargained for. In front of our two colleagues was a flock of small, suited men with small curled moustaches and dainty gloved hands who seemed to be pointing to poor Mr. Cassius and pleading to an irate Mr. Holmes (Livanov) that they too had been assigned to this case, and that the assistance of the good Messrs. Hercule Poirot would only help in this case. An immediate murmur of, "Damnable Belgians, poaching our caseload yet again", sprang up from Mr. Holmes (Rathbone) who, despite his usually liberal temperament, is sometimes given to rather extreme bouts of curiously anachronistic feeling, and a slightly less nationalistic murmur of agreement rippled through our assembled group.

Thankfully, my husband, along with the ever wise Mr. Holmes (Lee Miller) and his Ms. Watson, did not join in this general uproar of hatred for our fellow detectives, and had just commenced speaking with one of the Poirots with a rather unusually large moustache compared to the rest when a terrified squeak came from down the driveway, and poor Mr. Basil of Baker Street came running up the drive with two more, slightly smaller, groups of people following directly behind him. The Messrs. Poirot and our Agency immediately formed a blockade in front of the newcomers, quickly deciding that any animosity could well be forgotten in the case of yet more poachers of honest detective work.

A mustachioed woman stepped up from the assembled Poirots stepped forward and immediately enquired as to the nature of the newcomers. A group of uniformed officers (who, might I add, seemed to count among their ranks a few turncoat Inspector Lestrades) stepped forward to announce themselves as the Police Detective's Guild, lead by a M. Jules Maigrat and his Vice President, a Mr. Columbo.

The second group pushed past the first and, with a cloud of acrid cigarette smoke clinging around them, announced themselves as Marlowe and Co., private investigators extraordinaire.

All four groups (ours included) now commenced to announce that they, and they alone, were the legitimate holders of this current case, and began pushing and shoving at each other to get at Mr. Cassius.

Then, things began to turn. A Mr. Marlowe flicked some ashes in the eyes of a particularly flustered Poirot, who then flung out his cane at Mr. Holmes (Kra'nargh Sr.), who then immediately unleashed his poisonous spit upon a nearby beat cop, who, now also blinded, began swinging wildly around, clipping Mr. Watson (Chestnut) on the back of the head and

prompting the latter to fall atop an android Poirot, who then toppled into a man who had announced himself with a great yelp as Inspector Japp, until the entire courtyard was in chaos. Somewhere in the chaos, men with priestly garments, others clothed in Oriental robes, and still others who seemed far too young to be detectives (I believe one called herself Nancy whilst her hair was being pulled by a rather disagreeable Mr. Marlowe), all arrived, joining in on the general fray.

For several minutes not one thing was noticed until a Mr. Saihara rose his finger above the chaos and yelled out for all to focus upon Mr. Cassius. When we all turned, we were aghast to find our client surrounded. A whole gallery of other had formed in the time that we had been disunited and fighting, led by a man in a fine tuxedo, with a monocle in his eye and a knife in his hand, held to the throat of Mr. Cassius. He immediately introduced himself as M. Arsene Lupin, head of the Red-Handed League of the City, and he then threw his head back in laughter.

Around him, a variety of gentlemen stepped up to introduce themselves. A Mr. Raffles, a Mr. Lupin III, a Ms. Kyle, a rather gholish Mr. Craddock, and countless others stepped forward to announce their formation as a guild of polite, gentlemanly thieves, here to pilfer only the pockets of the residents of the City, not to cause them any real harm. They had arranged this little meeting to allow for them to meet what they called their competition, and they said that they were rather disappointed. With a collective laugh and a chorus cry of, "Catch us if you can!", the group lept from the side of Mr. Cassius and over the wall of the villa, leaving all of us gawking in their wake.

After a few moments of silence, a fuming Mr. Cassius shook his finger in the direction the League went, spitting out that he had called us all for the very reason that, combined, we might be more than apart, and that if we still wanted to prove that (and gain the favour of his pocketbook) we ought to set out at once, whether it made our usually sedate, deductive hearts squeal, to capture those fiends. All at once, the assembled detectives forgot all the conflict and began streaming into the street. Male, female, and other, human, Silurian, cyborg, Draconian, insectoid, gaseous, and otherwise, all ran off in the direction of the League.

My husband, taking Mr. Holmes (Lee Baker) and his Ms. Watson, along, used his boundless intuition to deduce that among such a footrace we must be the one group with the power of motorised transportation, and thus hailed a cab.

Indeed, it is from the back of that very cab that I am writing these words on a portable typewriter (I believe some call it a computer), with my ever dashing husband leaning out the window and shouting directions at the driver to make haste for the ghostly thief bounding across the rooftops. With such a man as he at the helm, how can we fail?

PLANET FIVE

AND HE LEAPS . . .

by Aristide Twain

He'd been lying down when the sky opened. He wasn't sleeping. The floor was cold and hard; he doubted whether anyone could sleep on it. But lying down had seemed better than nothing, with how exhausted he'd been, how pointless it had seemed to continue the journey.

There would have been something too morbid, too morgue-like, about lying flat on his back with his legs together and his arms at his side, here in this cool, empty place; so he'd set himself down in a starfish repose, splayed out in the dead centre of the circular room, with the disc of the ceiling filling his vision. It was painted a dark pastel blue, and he could almost believe he was looking up at the sky through an aperture. If he hadn't had the ability to tell himself that, he rather thought he'd have gone mad with claustrophobia; but this was good enough to calm himself, to enter a kind of sleep-like trance.

No stars, though. Pity. He'd hoped there'd be stars.

He rather thought that, if anyone had looked down at him from above, he'd have looked rather like the Vitruvian Man. He had the right haircut for it, at least—shoulder-length curls that spread out on either side of his head like a reddish-brown halo. On the other hand, he'd kept his coat on. It was chilly.

He was just musing on all this when a circle appeared in the fake sky, like a little, hollow moon. The hatchway had opened in the dead centre of the circular ceiling, directly above him. He squinted in the bright white light, out of which a thin, swaying shape uncoiled. Only when it had unfurled all the way down, inches from tickling his navel, did he realise it was a rope ladder.

His reaction was instantaneous. Within seconds, he'd leapt to his feet and then onto the ladder. He'd skittered halfway up its length when he thought to look up and realised he was on a rapid collision course with a pair of legs going the other way. They were clad in dark nylons, and disappeared up a dark blue skirt past the knees, but the feet were adorned with sturdy mountaineer's shoes. A moment after he froze, their owner looked down and halted too.

"What in the—"

"You're someone else!" he burst out joyously, cutting her dead off.

A heartbeat later, he hopped off the ladder, the slam of his shoes against the cold, cement ground reverberating across the rounded walls.

"Oh, I should hope so!" the woman agreed as she finished climbing down and joined him.

Once she'd let go of the ladder, she put her hands on her hips and stared at him intensely. He could see there was no hostility in her dark blue eyes—merely the concern of a professional assessing a difficult job that needed doing, either way. A toolbag was slung over her shoulders, adding to the effect. Observing her in turn, he couldn't help but reach for her hair, which he couldn't help but notice looked very much like this. He frowned as his slender fingers brushed against a reddish-brown lock.

"Are you *sure* you aren't me?"

She gently tapped his hand away, as one might do a child's; like a wounded dog running to its kennel, it flew to his own dark coat's lapel and grabbed onto it for dear life.

"Yes," she told him, "quite sure. For one thing, I'm a woman."

That didn't seem to convince him, fingers drumming on the velvet fabric of the lapel. "If you say so. But I might be one too. A woman, I mean. I'm not sure. Perhaps I'll remember."

She regarded him with mild interest, weighing what he'd said. "...Oh, are you? Well, then. Three cheers for the gender-neutral 'you', and do let me know if you figure it out." She smiled at him. "Hello, I'm a Doctor. My name's Liz Shaw."

"Yes, it is," said the stranger who might have been a man, nodding easily; then he froze again and tapped his hip, instantly realising that

hadn't been the expected answer. "Hm. Hmm. Now that's odd. But I'm fairly sure I'm not called Liz. Doctor, on the other hand..." He licked his lips like a wine-taster, and saw Liz smile subtly. "I *could* be a Doctor," he concluded. "But I don't think you're me."

Liz Shaw took a step back from the Doctor in the coat of dark blue velvet, and when she spoke again, it was with the quiet authority of a teacher, or a mother.

"Doctor, you're definitely *not* me. I know you've been down here a long time, but you need to understand that. We're *different people*."

"I know that," he snapped with a flash of anger. "I know! I know, I know, I know! Oh..." He slapped both his hands violently over his long, handsome face and ran them down its length with a groan. "Doctor Shaw, come with me."

She looked at him in askance. Without verbal reply, he grabbed her hand and dragged her across the little, circular chamber. There was a door there that she nearly hadn't noticed. He pushed it open, and—

●●●

—the door swung shut behind them.

While the Doctor ran on ahead until he was in the centre of the room, Liz Shaw froze a step beyond the doorway, trying to clear her thoughts. Had she come directly from the first room? She remembered only one door. But there was the strangest sense that they'd crossed considerable space in-between; that they'd bridged a great, empty nothing. She squinted in the harsh, electric light at the place they'd arrived.

It was a cold, plain, circular room.

"There! There! You see?" the Doctor urged her, spinning in place with his arms spread out, like the pole at the centre of a carousel. "Do you *see*?"

"What am I supposed to see?" asked Liz, with a hint of impatience. "These rooms look the same!"

"Ah, but they aren't the same! They aren't. Look at me, Doctor Shaw," said the Doctor, slowing his spin. "I'm a different person here. I'm a different person, every time. Do you see? Do you see it?"

Liz felt a pang in her chest. Yes. She saw it now. She hadn't, before, but it was screaming out.

His *coat*. It had been a dark pastel blue; now it was a handsome forest green. She knew, even before she looked up, that the ceiling would exhibit the same discrepancy.

"...Oh, my."

"I keep changing," he told her, suddenly dropping down to the floor, cross-legged and incredibly weary. His hands were joined together as if in prayer, bisecting his face. "Every time. Every room. It's exhausting. I'm exhausted, Liz, I'm so tired... It isn't just the coat. I'm a different man here."

She raised an eyebrow.

"Oh yes," he nodded, putting his hands away. For a moment he rested them on his knees, then, realising he didn't like it, shoved them awkwardly between his shins. "I'm definitely a man here. And I'm a bit more... settled."

"You seem younger," she observed, staring at his beautiful, tired face. "Younger than I've ever seen you, but older, too."

"Stodgier, perhaps."

"I didn't say that," she said, breathing out a hint of laughter. "Can you remember more, here?"

He shook his head like a child. Not so much older after all.

"Follow me," he said after a while.

He guided her towards a door. It was identical to the one they'd entered through, and, for a moment, Liz thought it was; but she looked over her shoulder and saw that the

other door was where they'd left it. The two exits were perfectly aligned, each invisible when one was facing the other. With the way he'd been lying down when she'd arrived, like the hands of a clock at 6 p.m., the Doctor wouldn't have been able to see either of them.

Perhaps that had been the point.

But already he was disappearing through the new door; she hurried and followed.

●●●

Now the Doctor seemed older, and much sadder. A five o'clock shadow had appeared on his chin, and his beautiful hair was cut short. His coat had lost its sheen and seemed a dark, faded gold; it was torn and ragged. He couldn't have been inside the room for more than twenty seconds before Liz joined him, but somehow, when she arrived, he'd already crouched in the centre of the chamber, hugging his knees in a foetal position.

"I don't like the brown rooms," he said, his voice a hoarse whisper. "I'd try to pass through them. Quickly. To run. I remember things, here. So many things. But I can't make sense of them—none of them add up."

"Memories rarely do," said Liz, philosophically. "Especially for someone your age."

"My age?" He looked at her with wide eyes. "Doctor Shaw—how old am I?"

"I've never really known," she replied with a shrug; there was an edge of annoyance in her voice, but long sanded down by fondness. "You wouldn't tell me. Several thousand years, you said, once."

"Then you know me...? You knew me... before I was here, in the rooms?..."

"Oh, yes," she said simply. "It's why I came for you."

He choked down a sob, half-mad, half-hopeful, and half-despairing; then he stared up at her with frightening intensity. "Liz, you have to help me. I don't remember who's dead and who's alive. There are two Sams. Or was it three? Liz, have you ever met a woman called Compassion?"

"No," she told him, gently, "but it's a good name. I'll remember it for you, if you like, when we leave here. But Doctor, you have to tell me. What did you mean? Running through the brown rooms?"

He let out a sad laugh, and let himself fall backwards, back flat against the floor and arms splayed out once more, though with his legs still bunched up.

"The rooms go on forever," he said. "Always in the same order. Blue, green, brown, blue, green, brown, blue, green, brown. On and on and on and on. I've walked, run, crawled and staggered through well over ten thousand, nine hundred and three sequences."

She looked at him, aghast. "Ten thousand, nine hundred and three?!"

"That's when I lost count."

Suddenly she was grabbing him up by the lapels of his coat. "Oh, Doctor! Why! Why would you do *that*!?"

"I had to find the exit," he protested, confused. "The end of it."

"Oh, come with me, you foolish old man!" she said, forcing him to his feet; he didn't resist so much as slump, drained of energy, but she didn't take no for an answer, letting his small bulk lean on her own shoulder. She stopped, hand on the handle, once they reached the door, and looked at him again with sudden concern. "Doctor... Please prepare for a shock. I'm very sorry. I would have come sooner, if I'd known you were here..."

"A shock? A shock?" The suggestion seemed to breathe a bit of life and defiance back into the Doctor, and he stood straighter, taking his weight off her. "Liz, I might not have access to all my memory, but allow me to say, nothing strange lying beyond an ordinary door could possibly shock me."

"Oh, it isn't strange," she told him, biting her lower lip, big blue eyes darting uneasily between his and the crack of the half-open door. "It isn't strange at all. I think you'll find it very familiar."

●●●

"Oh no. Oh dear, oh my."

The Doctor scarcely noticed as Liz Shaw crept up behind him, then brushed a hand against his, which hung limply at his side, a pale, slender thing against the backdrop of his beautiful dark blue coat.

"It isn't... as bad as all that," she said carefully. "Movement, activity, probably helped keep you sane. To an extent. It might not have been better if you'd known."

"I thought I was moving forward," the Doctor whispered like a weeping child. He stood perfectly straight and perfectly still. "All this time, I thought I was moving."

In the centre of the room with the dark blue ceiling, there was a simple rope ladder, gently swaying.

"I'm so sorry," said Liz Shaw.

The Doctor turned to look at her, then spun slowly in place, gesturing weakly at one door, then at the other.

"But... the doors. The doors are in alignment," he complained as if hoping the universe would register his constructive criticism. "I've been moving in a straight line! How *could* they be the same three rooms? Space doesn't go round and round, round and round, round and round, in *circles*! It—"

"I *know*!" Liz snapped at him, with such force that he stopped midway through his rant and looked at her, lost and angry and terribly tired.

She breathed slowly in and out, finding her words, then sat down on the cold, hard floor of the circular room, and gestured for him to do the same. He mirrored her like a newborn ape, looking at her with big, expectant eyes. At last, she spoke.

"It's very simple. Completely mad, but very simple. We aren't *in* space, Doctor," she said.

The Doctor swallowed. "Then where are we, Doctor Shaw?"

"*Un*-Space," she replied. "Outside the world, outside Time and Space. In the old days, you showed me so much—Ancient Britain, alien planets. The Silurians! Gods and monsters. Even another universe."

"I remember," the Doctor rushed to say. "I can't recall it. Not yet. Not now. But..." He tapped his forehead gently. "When you mention them, I know. They're in there. You're in there. I'll never forget you, Liz. Not ever. I swear."

"Oh, Doctor, don't make promises you can't keep," she told him with eyes full of weary love. "But—we never came here, Doctor. And for good reason. You see, there is the world, the cosmos—time and space. Structure. And there are the places *outside*. The margins of a book, the blank corners of the map. Forgotten things sink downwards, like a dinosaur in a tar pit. Into the depths, beneath the world."

"What's at the bottom?" the Doctor asked, eyes shining.

Liz smiled. "Good question. Even the Committee isn't sure... Perhaps some sort of Under-Universe. Perhaps Hell. Perhaps just the Void, or the walls of the world... or perhaps it goes on and on forever. Nobody really knows."

He raised an eyebrow. "Does he? Then perhaps you should ask him. What's the Committee?"

"The Un-Space Exploration Committee," said Liz, as if it were the most natural thing in the world. "You might never have been so reckless as to research Un-Space, Doctor, but don't think people haven't tried. There are whole hypothetical societies living down here, whole imaginary labyrinths tunneled through Un-Space. Humans are attracted to the unknown, the unexplained. Like moths to the flame. It's why we created U.N.I.T., in the old

days. And it's why the Committee was formed. To map out and research the patterns of things that aren't there."

The Doctor smiled at that. She wondered why. "And you work for the Committe, now?"

"No, there are other groups," she told him, matching his smile. "I work for one of them. P.R.O.B.E.—it stands for the Preternatural Research Bureau."

He ran the acronym in his head and frowned. "Hang on, that doesn't work. Where did the O and the E come from?"

"From nowhere. From Un-Space, perhaps," she told him, raising her eyebrows in mock-defiance. "In any case, we keep in contact, the Bureau and the Committee. And the *Conservatoire*... Well, we *have* to help each other, don't we? God knows the politicians won't. In any case, there's precious little they don't know of what goes on down here. They have ways. Like radar, if you like. Expeditions are another matter. They learned you were down here... and, eventually, they told me. But they wouldn't have come to get you themselves, not in a million years. I'm here at my own behest, my own peril."

He grabbed her hands and squeezed them between his own. "Thank you." Then he blinked. "Why peril?"

"Un-Space has its dangers like any biome. You might think of this place as the Un-Space equivalent of quicksand, or mosquitoes trapped in amber. You might have looped forever, if I hadn't tunneled down. If we lost the ladder, we could never reopen the entrance. Not from inside."

The Doctor jumped to his feet and lunged for the precious lifeline of knotted rope, hugging it to his body urgently. Only when he'd mashed it into the bare skin of his cheek long enough to believe it wasn't going anywhere did he open his eyes and look at Liz again.

"But what *is* it? Where *are* we, Doctor Shaw? Where have I been stuck all this time?"

"Oh, Doctor," said Liz with endless sympathy. "Up there, in 2005—yesterday and long ago—you leapt down into a chasm. Into the unknown. Something about insects, I understand. Saving the Earth. And... ..."

He looked at her.

"And...?"

"That's exactly it. And '...'. That's where you've been stuck all this time. Perhaps as many as twenty years, from your perspective."

"In the chasm?"

"No," she shook her head sadly. "In the unknown. In those three, round, identical dots. Outside Time and Space. Held in suspense, in the instant of leaping, looping and looping. Do you understand what I'm telling you, Doctor?"

"I think I'm beginning to," he said mildly, "but I can't say I like it."

"Neither do I," said Liz, pursing her lips, "and neither did Patsy, when I told her where I was going. Even when we're out of here, making our way back to real-time will take some doing. My poor little ladder is hanging off a cliff... and we're *in the ellipsis*."

The Doctor stared at her for a while—

—then explode into laughter.

"Ah! Hahahaha! Ha! The ellipsis! Dot, dot, dot! Round, and round, and round! Fantastic. That, Doctor Shaw—that is fantastic. Absolutely fantastic."

She smiled. "Good adjective. It suits you, you should keep it."

"Oh, I think I will," said the Doctor as he leapt onto the ladder. "Come along, Liz. This has gone on long enough. Go where you please, but I'm getting out of here. I'm going to resolve this cliffhanger, and then, I'm going to save the Earth!"

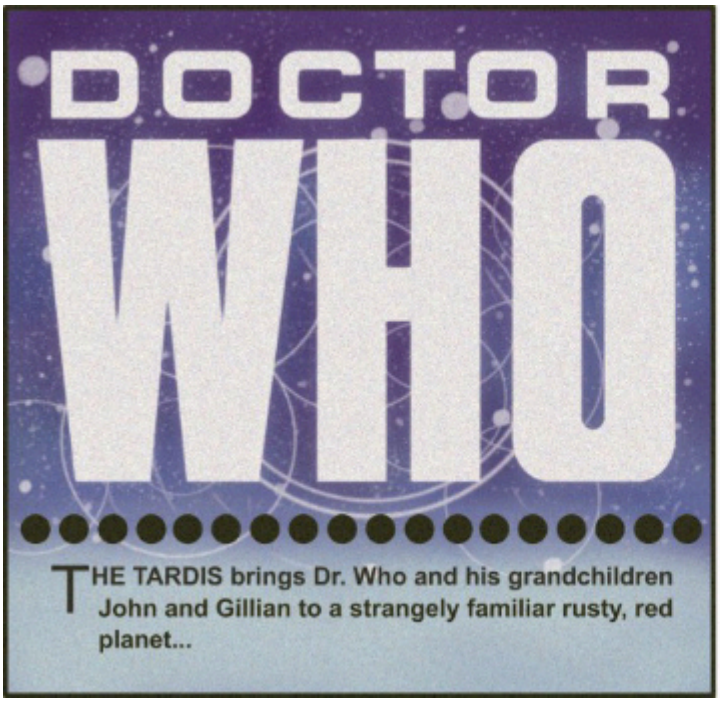
"And...?" asked Liz as she climbed on after him, feeling infectious laughter rising up in her own gullet.

The Doctor's shoulders were nearly past the opening, his coat of green and brown and blue reflecting impossible hues in the blinding light of possibility—but he still bent down to meet her eyes as he answered.

"And that's all there is to it. I'll finish this story if it kills me." He grinned a mad, wonderful grin. "*Period*."

THE RED PLANET

by Matt Jordan



RADIATION LEVELS ARE HIGHER HERE THAN WE'RE USED TO, BUT NOT TOO DRAMATIC...
WILL WE BE OK?
WE WILL, PROVIDED WE DON'T OVERSTAY OUR WELCOME, HM?

Dr. Who, John, and Gillian wandered through the crimson forest, climbing through growths old and new. Trunks and branches twisted their way through the air, making finding a way through a constant puzzle.

While the ground was crusty and red, it held a small amount of moisture, and with it some elements of life. Though far from swampland, they still met the occasional bug.

"Ugh, yuck!" said John, brushing a mosquito-like creature out of his red hair.

Gillian giggled, "Maybe it mistook your hair for the ground."

He harumphed. "Well, at least there's no Scorpi here!"

Eventually they came across some old huts, devoid of any evidence of life, but at least a sign that there was, or once had been, a civilisation on this planet, including a small village in these woods.

Dr. Who paused. "Why does this place look so familiar to me...?"

They lingered for some time, searching for anything they had missed. Eventually, John and Gillian convinced him to move along. Maybe, somewhere further in, they would find the former inhabitants.

In one clearing, something sat on a nearby boulder. As Gillian ran ahead, John pulled his grandfather over to get a closer look.

"Look at this!" he said. "It looks like some sort of animal statue?"

Indeed, it seemed to be, though few details remained. It was some sort of quadruped at least, with a long body held up by four short, spindly legs. Though worn down and in some cases snapped off, they could just make out spines along its back and a pair of eyestalks.

Dr. Who observed carefully, his hand to his lips. "It's completely rusted over. How strange.

A planet covered in rust."

John perked up, "Like Mars?"

"Indeed, though that's clearly not where we are."

"Oh." He slumped back down, disappointed.

"But it is the same effect," Dr. Who continued, "look at the soil too. It must be filled with oxides, giving it its red colour." He crouched and swept his hand through the dirt, revealing a mix of ash and regular brown clay dirt. "Yet it's only skin deep. How odd."

The implications hit John, "So the rust is new?"

"That's correct, my boy."

John continued, "And there's ash mixed in with the dirt. Maybe it's from a forest fire?"

Dr. Who hummed, brushing the soil off his hands. "Perhaps, but there's a lot of old dead plants still about. It may be my timescales are off, but you would've expected them to have burned too, hmm?"

Suddenly, interrupting their musings, Gillian called from a small distance away, "Grandfather! John! Come over here—I've got something even better."

Following her voice led them out from the trees onto a cliffside ledge. Before them was a great canyon, and on the other side, buildings! A whole city's worth, bronze and red, clustered together. Domes and pyramids and cylinders, connected by rails spiralling between the structures and patterned with rings of metallic spheres.

"Look, that must be where the villagers went. They built a whole city!" said Gillian.

Behind her, she heard a quiet mutter from her grandfather, "That city..."

"So you do recognise it?" said John.

"The radiation has dropped, the landscape rusted, and the Thals are gone. Yet how could I not?"

John and Gillian had never heard their grandfather speak like this before. They turned back to him, who to their shock had frozen in wide-eyed panic. "We're on Skaro," he said. "The home planet of the Daleks!"

"THAT IS CORRECT!"

An ear-piercing metallic screech from above confirmed Dr. Who's worst fears. Daleks in hoverbouts descended from the sky, surrounding them.

The Daleks brought the three into the city. With gunsticks locked on to each of them, even as exchanged between outer- and inner-city patrols, there was no chance to escape. They were taken immediately into a prison cell.

"ONE OF YOU WILL SOON BE COLLECTED FOR INTERROGATION," the Dalek that brought them here said. "RATIONS WILL BE PROVIDED AT THAT TIME."

The cell door slammed down.

"Well, that's good at least," said John.

Dr. Who's mood remained dour, "They must want something from us. The Daleks are terrible killing machines; normally they would exterminate trespassers without a second thought."

"Which of us will have to go with them?" asked Gillian.

"I don't think we'll get much of a say in that."

Like everything else but the Daleks themselves, the cell was damaged and rusty. Panel seams showed. In the corner of the cell, where a camera had once hung, wires were now exposed.

Sat on the rusty bench, Gillian looked at her hands, which had rested on it as she sat. "Hopefully they don't have tetanus on this planet."

Dr. Who began to pace back and forth in the limited space available, both to survey the cell's damage and to take stock of the situation. Already, some ideas were beginning to take root, but it would take time...

It was unclear how much time had passed when the door rose again. Ten minutes, thirty, an hour? Other than the rhythm of Dr. Who's pacing and tapping, there was little way to tell.

A pair of Daleks again stood before them. The one in front held a tray of processed mush with its manipulator arm. It turned its eyestalk to each of them in silence before beginning to speak, "EACH OF YOU WILL BE INTERROGATED. FIRST WILL BE THE FEMALE."

"You can't take her!" cried John, stepping in front of his sister.

Gillian pushed his arm down. "It's ok, John, I promise," she said. "I'll be fine, won't I, grandfather?"

Though he tried to hide it, Dr. Who couldn't help but hesitate in his answer. Nevertheless, he put on a positive face, "Yes, yes. Of course you will, my dear. She'll be ok, John."

Gillian took the tray from the Dalek and stepped close to her grandfather, handing it over.

"Be safe, my child," he whispered to her, praying it would not hear. "We will find a way out."

Gillian nodded slowly and turned towards the door. John, after a moment, moved aside to let her past.

Once she was outside the cell, the second Dalek took command. "YOU WILL MOVE BETWEEN US. MOVE!"

As she passed the first Dalek, it rotated back to the cell. When it touched a control on the wall, the door slammed shut once again.

Gillian was led into a grand control room. There were more Daleks, all but one situated at various consoles. Some watched her enter, others carefully monitored readings. Unlike the cell and the world outside, this room looked shiny and new, presumably prioritised for rust removal, like the Dalek travel machines themselves.

The remaining Dalek sat on a platform above the rest was very much unlike the others, unique even. Was it the leader? Gillian wondered to herself. Unlike the silvers and blues the other Daleks were largely made of, it was a brilliant gold. It was crafted into a very different shape too, squat and top-heavy with a massive spherical top-half, capped by several lights rather than the two that flashed when the other Daleks communicated.

"CONTAIN THE FEMALE!" it commanded in a booming voice.

"YES, EMPEROR," the Daleks that had escorted her here responded in sync.

Gillian was directed into the centre of the room. As she stood there, a bright beam suddenly surrounded her, briefly blinding her. When her eyes settled, she found she could no longer move, the beam holding her in place.

The Dalek Emperor began its interrogation. "THE DOCTOR PREVIOUSLY CAME TO SKARO WITH... ASSOCIATES," it said, "BUT YOU AND THE ADDITIONAL PRISONER DO NOT APPEAR TO MATCH OUR HISTORIES. IDENTIFY YOURSELF."

"I'm... I'm his granddaughter," said Gillian.

The Emperor turned its bulbous head back towards her. "SO YOU ARE THE ONE CALLED 'SUSAN'? YOUR APPEARANCE HAS CHANGED."

Susan?

"W-what?" stammered Gillian. "I'm not Susan. Who-who's that?"

"THE ORIGINAL DESCENDENT WHO CAME WITH THE DOCTOR. YOU MUST BE THE REPLACEMENT."

Gillian felt spikes deep in her chest—how

dare he? She angrily retorted, "I'm not any replacement! I'm Gillian Who, and the boy in that cell is my brother, John. We're Dr. Who's grandchildren, and he's never mentioned any others. Your records must be wrong."

The Emperor crept forwards to the edge of the dais, as if to get a better look at her.

"ARE YOU SURE?"

Gillian didn't know how to answer. Was she? How much did she really know about her grandfather? He had just shown up, an invitation to meet. The orphanage had thought it legitimate, probably hoping he would take the two out of their hands, but did that really mean anything? They had trusted him, finding him in that yard near Barnes Common, yet he had never told them about a 'Susan' or his previous travels.

The Daleks questioned Gillian over and over. Had she seen Skaro before? What they had seen in the Petrified Forest. How they were reacting to the diminished radiation. Most seemed fairly safe to answer, thankfully. Gillian responded to each query one-by-one, doing what she could to satisfy the Daleks without giving them more information than they needed.

Finally, they arrived at the question they had been waiting for all along.

"AND NOW, WHERE IS YOUR HOME PLANET?"

Several of the Daleks, previously distracted by their work, swivelled their heads towards her.

Suddenly, the reason for the Daleks' interrogation, despite having the three travellers imprisoned at their mercy, dawned on Gillian. Her grandfather had said that they were dangerous killing machines. They already shared a history with him, before he had met her and her brother in London.

They wanted to know where their home was. They wanted to find the Earth.

She couldn't tell them the truth.

"We're from far away," she told him. "Very, very far away. The next universe but one."

The Emperor paused, sceptical, then pushed further. "AND THE PLANET'S NAME? ITS DESIGNATION? ITS SYSTEM?"

Gillian hesitated. She knew she couldn't tell him the truth, no matter what. "Um..."

The golden Dalek didn't even give her a chance to come up with a response. "THEN YOU LIE!" it cried, lingering in rage on the last syllable. "IF YOU CANNOT OR WILL NOT TELL US THE TRUTH, YOU WILL BE MADE TO." It turned to a nearby Dalek. "PREPARE THE MIND PROBE!"

"You have an escape plan?"

Back in the cell, Dr. Who was picking at the rust on the wall with his fingernail, focusing on the area next to the door.

"That's right, my boy," he replied. "Skaro wasn't like this last time I was here. Something must have happened recently, causing all this rust, so much and so sudden that the Daleks haven't been able to repair everything yet—just their cages, likely infused with a new alloy." He climbed on the bench and fiddled with the loose wiring in the corner. "They haven't even replaced the cell camera. They're completely in the dark!"

"Well, that's good," John nodded, "but how else does that help us?"

"It helps us, as the Daleks have forgotten their chemistry!" he replied. "Have a taste of the food they brought. It's quite safe, I assure you."

Reluctantly, John scooped a finger-load of the paste and stuck it in his mouth, trying to hold back his gagging. "It doesn't taste good," he cringed.

"But what does it taste like?"

"It's really sour. Like vinegar or something."

Dr. Who waggled his finger at him, "Exactly. It's very acidic, full of acetic acid, if I'm not mistaken. We can use that to dissolve this rust."

"And expose the door wiring?"

"That's it. It will take a little while, and a bit of sore scrubbing, but once we get enough off, we can use the old camera wires to bypass the lock."

John was amazed. "Ok! Let's do it then. So we can free Gillian."

"Then there's nothing to lose." Dr. Who grinned, "Let's start splattering the wall with this mush!"

Gillian shook in fear. Painfully needling two interfaces into either side of her temple, the Daleks had wired her into the probe.

"NOW," said the Emperor, "IF YOU WILL NOT TELL US WHERE YOU'RE FROM, YOUR SUBCONSCIOUS WILL."

Suddenly, Gillian felt a shock through her head and the world around her melted away. She felt dizzy as a whirlwind of sights and memories flashed across her vision: Kleptons, vinyl records, Zarbi, orphanage bunkbeds, her school mistress when she was six. An abandoned lot labelled number 16. The jolly face of Father Christmas. Memories of her life before and after leaving home.

But then, there was more. Things she didn't know she had ever seen.

Strange circular runes. A mobile of stars, another baby to her side. A young man resembling her grandfather and a woman speaking.

"THE MEMORIES ARE... CONFUSED," said a Dalek voice in the distance.

Fleshy strings, gleaming with a beautiful golden light. Eyes behind half-moon specs. A great house stood halfway up a dry mountain.

A familiar girl with short dark hair in black and white robes.

A large red planet looming high above...

"ENOUGH!" The Dalek Emperor's voice cut through the chaos.

Suddenly she was back in the control room, stood below him.

"WHAT WAS THAT PLANET?"

"I-I don't know," she stammered. She thought it was Skaro based on the colour, but clearly not. "I've never seen it before, I swear!"

The Emperor's gaze pierced into her. "THEN IT IS TIME TO INTERROGATE THE DOCTOR."

Maybe it was, Gillian thought as they took her away. All that, how could she not have known? How could he have hidden it from them? Was he even...?

Soon, Gillian had been returned to the cell. Her Dalek escort opened the door only to find no-one inside.

"WHERE-?"

It creeped in, finding just a red solution dripping into a puddle on the floor.

"Now, John!"

Suddenly John and Dr. Who emerged from a nearby corner, shoving the Dalek into the tight space. As it tried to spin back, Dr. Who quickly slammed the exterior door control.

"UNDER ATTACK! YOU WILL BE EXTER-!"

The Dalek never finished its threat, the door slamming shut in its face.

"Gillian!" John cried, embracing his sister.

“Thank goodness you’re ok. Are you hurt.”

“I’m fine...” she replied, feeling the swollen spots on either side of her temple. She watched her grandfather, who only gave a relieved smile back.

Suddenly, the whole corridor shook.

“What was that?” John asked. “Did it explode or something?”

“No,” Dr. Who replied, “that was something bigger.”

They hurried along the corridor to a nearby hemispherical window. Outside, a huge shower of meteorites stormed down across the distorted scarlet landscape.

Fortunately, getting out of the city wasn’t too hard. Dr. Who was familiar with the way out, and the corridors were surprisingly devoid of Daleks. Every so often they would be forced to hide, or choose another direction that hadn’t been struck, but eventually they got outside.

Space rocks rained down in all directions shaking the ground. The three stumbled their way around the gorge, keeping under cover as explosions blasted and Dalek hoverbouts swept the sky.

Eventually they reached the forest once again. As Dr. Who looked ahead for the way back to the TARDIS, Gillian asked the question that had been on her mind. “John, have you ever heard of someone called Susan?”

“Susan?” he repeated. “Is she from school?”

No. Has grandfather ever mentioned her to you?”

“I don’t think so.”

As Dr. Who returned, John passed on the question, “Grandfather, have you ever heard of a Susan?”

He froze. “Wh-what did you-”

Gillian caught his flinch and turned on him. “Yeah, who is she? You’ve never mentioned her before.”

“I-”

“Is she your ‘real’ granddaughter?”

Dr. Who stuttered, failing to answer as John looked on in confusion. “Real granddaughter?” he murmured.

Eventually, the old man took a deep breath and stood up straight, holding his lapels. “Gillian,” he said authoritatively, “We are in the most dangerous situation we’ve ever been in and we need to focus on getting back to the TARDIS. I promise to you that I will answer your questions, but now is not the time.”

John glanced between the two. “Yes, that’s fine. Gillian, let’s go, please?”

Looking at her brother, she sighed, “Ok...”

Together they moved on. Fire roared in the distance and meteorites continued to hit the ground, an impact every minute.

Eventually they found the TARDIS, thankfully still standing, though the surrounding landscape had been completely transformed, with a scattering of craters all around.

They ran up as Dr. Who prepared his key. They were just feet away when, suddenly, a metallic voice came from behind.

“EXTERMINATE!”

“No!” John yelled, spinning in front of his grandfather and brother.

And being struck directly in the chest by a ruby ray beam. Gillian screamed as a bright

cyan light filled her eyes, as x-rays blasted through John's body from the impact point. He collapsed to the ground, and she dropped with him.

"John, no!" she cried. "No, no, no..."

Daleks approached along the trail, blasters trained upon the two survivors.

"I'm sorry, my dear," said Dr. Who, "I'm sorry I couldn't protect—"

His sentence was drowned out by one more metallic scream. "EXTERMIN-AHHHH!"

As Dr. Who and Gillian, still clinging to John's body, had held to be hit by the Daleks' weapons, their would-be-exterminators screamed as they were suddenly engulfed in a blaze of flames from the craters. Flames coming from...

"Mechanoids?" said Dr. Who, stunned.

Indeed, a Mechanoid trundled out from the centre of each crater, engaging in battle with the surrounding Daleks, exchanging beams and fire. Each second, more enforced Mechanoids slammed into the ground around the Dalek city.

"That wasn't a meteorite shower. It was an assault!" he realised. "No wonder the city was so empty."

"Who cares?!" cried Gillian. "We need to get John inside, while they're distracted."

"Yes..." he gasped, "yes..." as he turned and used the TARDIS key. He pushed through the door, holding it open as Gillian pulled her brother inside. As metallic screams and explosions grew in volume outside, he rushed to the console and took off. They were safe.

As he walked back over to the doorway, Gillian collapsed, digging her face into John's chest crying. "John..."

Dr. Who's eyes, meanwhile, remained keenly focused on John's face, despite tearing up themselves. "You can do it, my boy," he muttered. "You can do it."

Gillian looked up at her grandfather with red eyes, "Do what?"

Suddenly, like the Daleks that killed him, John's body lit ablaze in brilliant golden flames. Gillian jumped back from her brother in shock. She gasped, "John! What's happening?!"

She looked to her grandfather for some sort of answer, only to see a smile break on his lips behind his hand. With his other arm, he hugged her around the shoulders, nodding to John's glowing form. "Look, child. Look!"

Fallen to the ground outside the TARDIS, John had looked still and peaceful, as if deep in a dreamless sleep. Now, he still slept, but not so peacefully. His face subtly twitched and twisted as the golden energy (which Gillian realised, almost looked familiar) flowed out from his skin.

"Is he... hurting?" she asked.

"He's alive," Dr. Who replied.

Gillian desperately wished he had said something more encouraging. With each flinch, another feature of her brother's seemed to melt away, replaced with something new. The auburn hues of his hair bleached away in the light, leaving a near-platinum blonde. His freckles vanished as his skin tone became less pale. His stature broadened.

Suddenly, the fire was gone and the stranger sat up. He gasped deeply for air.

"John?" she called out, gently. "Is that you?"

The boy turned to her, a yellow glow still in his panicked eyes. In two blinks, it vanished, and she found herself looking into eyes she could not help but recognise, despite lacking any physical resemblance to those she had grown up looking into.

"Yes," he croaked, before clearing his new throat. "Yes, Gillian. It's me, I think."

"But... your hair!" she said in disbelief. "Your face?"

John felt his face, then his hands, then his

body. “I-I don’t know.”

“Well done, John my boy, well done. You made it through.”

They both stared at him. “What do... you mean?” asked Gillian.

“This gift of... hm... ‘renewal’... is, shall we say, inherited,” Dr. Who said, in a somewhat hesitating fashion. He paused as if in thought, then repeated more firmly, “You inherited it from me.” He looked back towards Gillian. “You too, my dear.”

“Me... t-too?” stammered Gillian.

“Of course. It’s a bit of a secret, but you’ve all inherited it from your old grandfather. All three of you. You, John... and your cousin Susan.”

All three of them...

Suddenly Gillian’s anxieties, which had built-up since the mind probe, melted away. She flung herself at her grandfather, wrapping her arms around him. “I’m sorry,” she mumbled, her face deep in his waistcoat.

Dr. Who, who momentarily had to support himself on the console to avoid being knocked to the ground by her hug, gently patted her back.

Once everyone had recovered, Gillian pulled John away to the TARDIS wardrobe (“We’ll need to find something for your new form. Maybe I can find something too?”) while Dr. Who steered them to their next, hopefully safer, destination.

“Never mind returning to Earth,” he muttered, resting his hands on the console. One deep breath later, he set about navigating them in space to a nearby colony where they would be able to rest.

Destination: Trodos, 2066 A.D.

DOCTOR WHO
AND THE DALEKS

THE CHANGING CORPSE

A TIME HUNTER STORY

by Cole Martin

The drizzle was almost as thick as the dread in the air. A man, or someone who seemed like a man, limped through the alleyway, the cityscape behind reminding him of the endless bustle of life. Which was ironic, considering he was dying. But there was something wrong; it wasn't starting. Why wasn't it starting?! He kept checking his hands for the slight glow, any sign of rebirth. But there was nothing. Nothing but pain. He was so close to where he needed to be; just a few more steps. Suddenly, the world seemed to rotate around him, and before he knew it, he was on the ground. As he sighed out his final breath, his last thought was of his friend; she would never let him live this down. His eyes, empty of any spark, reflected the "ironic" cityscape.

Honoré walked briskly down the street with a bag of fresh pastries in hand. People and cars rushed past, leaving him in a strange headspace. So close to life, and yet so far away at the same time. He was an American living in London, a soldier without war. And apparently, he was something called time-sensitive.

He had this ability where he could touch people or objects and learn everything about them. Even the slightest brush of the hand or tap of an item could give him a glimpse of their entire timeline. He preferred to keep to himself, but he'd found himself stuck with Emily, another time-sensitive but with amnesia; someone who had recently become his friend. Emily's abilities were more undetermined. But one thing they did know: when they held hands, they could travel anywhere throughout creation. They just had to stick together.

Emily would laugh and call themselves Time P.I.s, which Honoré wasn't quite sure he agreed with. He was just a fixer, someone who tried to do right by those who would normally be left behind by the system. He knew what that was like, and nobody deserved to be forgotten.

As Honoré rounded the corner to return home, he found Emily at the door. The grave look on her face told him exactly the kind of morning it was going to be. It was a shame, too. He was really looking forward to the breakfast he'd brought.

"I've been waiting for you," Emily began. "You're far later than usual today, and especially on a day where it really counts." She was practically tapping her foot and tapping a wristwatch like in the cartoons.

"Emily, you're worrying me. What's going on—" Honoré didn't even get to finish his sentence. There, on the flat's main table, lay a body.

"Jesus, Emily, what did you do?"

"What did I do?! Nothing!"

"There's a body on our table."

"I found him."

Honoré raised an eyebrow. "You found him?"

"Yeah, I found him right outside the front door. I figured I should bring him inside before neighbors start asking questions."

"Emily, you can't just move a body! We know nothing about him—" Honoré was interrupted when the body suddenly erupted into a blinding, golden light. After a few moments, the miniature explosion died down, leaving a completely different body.

Emily was the first one to speak. "Correction: We don't know anything about her."

"What the hell..." Honoré approached the corpse, grabbing a pen. Using the tip of the pen, he poked the flesh of the corpse. The corpse

remained unbothered. Honoré seemed content with his investigation and turned to speak with Emily again before the body exploded again. By the time he managed to spin around, the light had already faded away, and a new body was in its place.

"She, he, they...they've been doing that over and over again. I've never seen anything like it."

Would you even remember if you had? Honoré thought to himself, biting his tongue. He needed to calm down, this wasn't her fault. It was just a bit of a shit morning.

After a pause, Emily finally made the request that Honoré was waiting for. "Could you... work your magic?"

Honoré nodded and sighed. A single touch, and he could get a glimpse of their entire timeline. He'd always assumed it was a sort of intuition he'd gained from years of needing to read people in order to survive or be taken seriously. Like "deduction," from those Doyle books he liked to read as a kid. But after meeting Emily and the mysterious "Dr. Smith," he'd learned it was more of a superpower.

He approached the corpse, which had already changed again, and braced himself before touching its hand. At first, nothing happened. He glanced at Emily, who was giving him an expectant look, and tried again. Why wasn't his ability working?! What would it take before he could see-

EVERYTHING

Horrors and wonders. The cabinet of light, the glimmer at the end of the tunnel, faraway worlds with tall tales come to life. Things from his most wonderful dreams or most devastating nightmares. Two people by a campfire speaking of a rhythm of possibilities. A strange, sort of police station, in the midst of a jubilee. Somebody in a long velvet coat, wandering various streets with neon signs. A young woman coming out of a flaming records office. A mysterious park, with trees growing suddenly, only to be followed by a building growing as if it were alive. It was followed by whispers of "life is a shoreline..." Another woman, an archaeologist, laughing and grieving and living. And—

Suddenly, Honoré was on the floor, in pure agony. Emily was leaning over him, trying to say something, but he couldn't hear her. A look of panic and concern was plastered over her face. But all he could hear was the ringing in his ears, and a craving for unlimited rice pudding.

After a few moments, the ringing died down, and he could make out Emily's words. "Honoré, are you okay?! What happened?! Please, say something. Anything!"

He let out a little groan to let her know he was still alive, before letting his head gently hit the floor. He just needed to rest for just a few seconds. Or maybe a few minutes. Or maybe longer. Maybe—

No. A small voice in his head told him to get up. He had to keep moving. Come on, Honoré, it's time to get back to work. No rest for the wicked. He gave himself another annoyed groan before forcing himself into a sitting position, still on the floor.

"What happened?" he croaked.

"You just froze," Emily began, "you touched the body's hand, and you went rigid. Your eyes rolled into the back of your head, and you started speaking in tongues. No matter what I did, I couldn't snap you out of it, you were like a statue. I didn't know what else to do, so I just shoved you to break the connection."

"Well, thanks for that. I think you may have just saved me."

"I didn't do much, I just-"

"Emily, I mean it. Truly. Thank you."

Emily smiled. It was a nice moment between friends. "So, what did you end up seeing?"

Honoré paused. "I think I saw...everything. There was so much. It was like trying to get a glass of water from the sink and instead getting hit with a flood. I've never experienced anything like it."

Whoever, or whatever this body was, it was wrong. It wasn't meant to be here, in their lives, in the place they called home. He glanced back at

the body and found its newly blue skin and freshly sprouted frills unnerving.

There was one more thing they could do, but it was risky. An attempt at travelling. The thing is, they never knew what they were going to get, or where (or when) they might end up. Honoré and Emily gave each other a look, and without needing to utter a word to each other, they were already in agreement. They had to know what was happening here, and this was their best chance. In fact, it was their only chance at this point.

The two friends stepped forward, and they each grasped the other's hand.

"Focus on the body," Emily said, "focus on last night's date, focus on what the weather was like."

It was starting. Honoré could feel the familiar pull in his gut, the power welling up. Here we go. But suddenly, they were flying through the air, away from each other. Honoré barely had time to think "Uh-oh" before he slammed into the wall, and was sent into darkness. Honoré was unconscious before he even hit the floor.

Reality slowly started seeping into Honoré's darkness, bringing him back to consciousness. Honoré pushed himself up from the ground, letting out a sigh of both pain and exasperation. These last few months, he'd been knocked unconscious more than he had his entire life; it was becoming a bit of a pattern. But twice in under an hour? That was a new record, and not the kind of record that deserved any sort of praise.

He rushed to the other side of the room to find Emily on the ground, still unconscious. She looked peaceful; it was probably the first decent rest she'd gotten in months. Christ, that was a depressing thought.

But there was something else. Something was different, but he couldn't quite put his finger on it. But as the last of his senses returned, he knew exactly what it was. Tea. He could smell freshly brewed tea. Who the hell had made tea in their place?!

He turned back to Emily and gently shook her shoulder. "Emily, Em, you've gotta wake up. Emi—"

Emily's eyes shot open, and before he could even blink, she was already on her feet. "What happened?! What's going on? And hold on, is that tea? And...oh..."

Honoré followed her eyes and found a glaring detail he had missed. The corpse, the thing that had caused all of this trouble, was gone from the table.

"It couldn't have just stood up and walked away..." Honoré grumbled.

"Unless..." Emily continued his thought.

Together, they both stepped into the other room, where the aroma of Earl Grey wafted from.

There, they found a man comfortably seated in one hell of an armchair, sipping a cup of tea. The chair was one that Honoré had never seen before; its upholstery was exquisite and highly detailed, matching the man seated in their main room. There was one last thing that just didn't make sense to Honoré: where had the man gotten the tea? He and Emily were out and had been meaning to get more.

The man was older, with lines covering his face, his silver hair slicked back. But there was something else about him. Despite these carved lines showing a level of exasperation, there was also a sprinkle of mischievousness in his eyes. The man's impressive grey eyebrows rose, the perfect image of arrogance. "It took you both long enough," he stated with a gruff voice, "I was beginning to get bored."

Emily said exactly what Honoré was thinking: "Hello, Dr. Smith. It's been a while."

Dr. Smith gave a slight grunt in response. It was obvious now that Honoré thought about it. The last time Honoré had met Dr. Smith, his life was thrown into the strange and uncanny. Honoré didn't know much about Emily's past, but he knew that there was some sort of history

between her and this strange man. Only someone like him could bring something so unnatural to their doorstep.

After a long pause that was full of tension, Honoré finally sliced through the silence. "Are you going to explain any of this to us, or should we just watch you drink tea?"

"You're free to join me," Dr. Smith offered. But it seemed like the invitation was out of obligation more than an actual desire for connection.

"Did you bring enough to share?"

"...no, I suppose I didn't."

"Then I guess that leaves plenty of room for an explanation," Honoré said, but it came out much harsher than expected. Or did it? The more Honoré considered it, the angrier he got. This so-called "Doctor" simply wasn't right. He brought trouble wherever he went, even more trouble than he and Emily normally got into (which was saying something). And it was always on his terms. Honoré gritted his teeth as Emily grabbed herself a chair, and he leaned against the wall.

"You can grab a chair if you'd like," Dr. Smith offered.

"I'd rather stand."

"It's a free country," Dr. Smith chuckled, "for now."

Honoré glanced at Emily, who gave him a look that silently said "don't be rude," but for once, Honoré refused to fold. He deserved better. Emily deserved better.

"Alright," Dr. Smith began, finally breaking the silence, "I should probably begin by telling you that I'm not your Dr. Smith."

"What the hell does that even mean—?!"

Dr. Smith continued, unbothered by the interruption. "I'm from another reality, another universe. Have you heard the theory of the multiverse?"

"I have," said Emily. "I'm not entirely sure where, or when, but I have. Different versions of the same world where things are slightly different."

"Correct," Dr. Smith nodded, "there are an infinite number of them, and new ones are being created with every decision we make. Some differences are more subtle. Someone might be a writer instead of a soldier, I might have chosen to have a cup of coffee rather than this cup of tea. But others have more complex changes. One where the Germans won the war, one where pink poodles rule the planet, and so on."

Honoré's head was spinning, and Dr. Smith took this pause as an invitation to keep going. "Well, I'm from one of these alternate realities. The thing is, I'm not exactly supposed to be here, in this universe. I have some—what you might call 'allergies.' It caused me to begin what you might call a 'process' that my people take part in. But I couldn't stop, I was stuck in a loop. I knew that I needed powerful time sensitives to snap me out of this process. And you, Mr. Honoré,—"

"It's just 'Honoré.'"

"—Mr. Honoré, are one of the most powerful time sensitives I've ever come across. You have the ability to see anything and everything. With the correct building of your skills, your knowledge could be infinite."

Honoré took a few seconds to process this. "So when I touched your hand, that's what I saw, was it? All of these different universes?"

Dr. Smith nodded.

"And what caused this allergic reaction?" Emily asked.

"Oh, just a bit of antimatter. Don't worry, it's been handled."

"If these allergic reactions are so bad," Emily asked, "why do you stay in this universe?"

Dr. Smith's expression darkened at this. There was a storm in his eyes, one that swirled with a life that had been experienced for far too long. "No choice, unfortunately. My universe is gone, dead. Destroyed by a madman. I'm stuck here, but I'm travelling with someone. Bernice is probably sampling the local cuisine as we speak.

Unless she's getting into trouble like usual."

Dr. Smith paused. "She'll never let me live this down..."

"Smith, focus..."

"You remind me of her. Sticking your nose into places it doesn't belong for the better. You two might get along—"

"Smith—"

"Right."

"So..." Emily began, "what now?"

"Well, now..." Dr. Smith shot up out of his seat. "I leave. You can keep the chair if you'd like. I have plenty in my cabinet."

And with that, he made his way to the door. He was much faster than you would expect from a man his age. He may have been quick, but Emily was much quicker. She now stood between him and the door, attempting to block his way.

"I still have so many questions. Questions about myself that you never answered. These are answers I'm owed."

"Hold on—"

"I have a right to know my own life, Dr Smith. That's the least anyone has a right to. Their own identity."

Dr. Smith sighed at this. "I don't disagree. But the thing is, like I explained before, I'm not your Dr. Smith. I don't immediately have his knowledge. Believe me, I would tell you if I knew."

Bullshit. Honoré didn't understand how he knew, but he could just tell. Dr. Smith was lying. He knew something. But there was something else Honoré couldn't explain, which was even more disturbing: he didn't say anything. Something in his gut told him to hold back. He stepped forward in an attempt to defuse the situation.

After a moment of tense silence, Emily relaxed and seemed to accept this answer, and she took a few steps back. Dr. Smith gave a quick nod, but then quickly hissed to Honoré. "Keep an eye on her, she's capable of more than she knows."

And with that, he was gone. Honoré and Emily simply stood next to the flat's front door. God, those pastries sounded good right now.

"So what now?" Emily asked.

"What we always do," Honoré sighed, "we keep going, we carry on."

And with that, the two of them walked into the flat, ready for the next case. Whatever the future held for them, they would handle it. Together.

UNTITLED

by Joni Smith

"What do you know," said Liz, "about temporal theory?"

She was chipper enough, at first glance. Second was more dubious... Patsy knew how Liz looked when she was genuinely excited about things, as tired from work as she was, and when there was something on her mind. "Are you sure of having this conversation at 1 a.m.?" Patsy asked, playfully exasperated, but it would be entirely predictable for Liz to brush that off. She'd met some other researchers like this, you could never drag them away from explaining an insight on something. When Liz nodded, she continued. "Well, I know we're aware of alternate timeline versions of people."

"That's about right. But what makes some of them connect to here and not others?" Liz sighed. "And there are other questions. How do human minds even make sense of all that? We have documentation of people remembering things they weren't there for, not in our timeline. The Kingdom case, for one. Torchwood might have something—if they only weren't so goddamn uncooperative!"

"Oh, the time I've wasted keeping *them* off our back." Patsy smirked and put her hand on the table; there were stale breadcrumbs on it. "What *kind* of connection? You're going to need something more specific than *that*."

"Well," Liz took a larger sip of her coffee, "recently I've been having a very peculiar nightmare."

"Really."

A bird cawed outside the window.

"I'm on a moonbase somewhere. I think it's the one we were building, in the eighties—"

She explained, levelly. Liz *was* always good at being composed, more than Patsy sometimes, for all she had been in surveillance. But a nightmare *shouldn't* have been a crisis to be composed *about*. Or, not *most* of them. Of course everything could be compromised, every gap, every channel. Security mindset, she heard it called.

"—we're isolating everything we *can*. Do you know how sulfuric acid smells?" Liz shook her head. "And the *bodies*. It was the aughts, I felt. So the timeline—I hope we've just avoided this. I—"

Liz checked, of course. When she visited the moonbase for other reasons, it—

Unfinished, not as much as she'd *expect* but some. And where there was the console and Agent Yellow, just rock. Cycles? How do loops within cycles work? She'd handed off command to Giles in half a daze, later, a bit grateful for a grounding, though not—

"trusted friends" wasn't quite right, though Giles was a personal friend, after years, but that wasn't the point. Liz liked the thing PROBE was doing, that was all.

It was—what the hell—it was like swimming. She didn't even remember being dragged through these corridors, or dragging herself, who knows with how dreams are usually like... But she remembered remembering, in a sense— no, not quite that. As if she could feel the shape where the memory was supposed to be. Guess at its contents by its contours...

"'Supposed' doesn't mean anything", she remembered saying once. "There's duty, and choice, and the laws of physics. That's all." It was to a psychic, a boy of twenty or so. He worried about what a sure future *meant*, if there's anything here to follow, or to avoid, or what's even *possible*... Liz wouldn't separate the three concepts, anymore. She lived within this physics, though she was sure there were others... She'd choose what she'd choose, so she was in a world where she *would* choose it. (Maybe the TARDIS could shift between those. You wouldn't even need too many new dimensions for that, though she'd never gotten to hear it *properly* explained, to be frank.) Tug on the strands of fate from *her* end: same information

either way, right?

Or *did* it happen in this timeline? She should check *that*, too. The name should be in PROBE's records somewhere.

"So."

"Yes, I asked Az, he was willing to look around for me. Nothing!"

Patsy leaned back in her chair; it squeaked. "Okay, I trust you, Liz, maybe this really is professionally interesting. But I don't think we can keep burning PROBE's resources on it."

"Huh. Nothing for it, then." But continuing to wonder if she would—

She laid on her back, listening to cars roll by. Had to remind herself she wasn't dead; held her left thigh in her hands, quietly as she could, examined details of its skin to make sure it didn't change when she wasn't looking.

So many *people*. How—

It's not like it was *new*. But it hit her like a hurricane, though it wouldn't have *then*... She was trying to research it, she was trying to know. Doesn't remember *how* it turned out. Army—threats?

Science, the science she trusts, the social process of people checking and rechecking and working *together* for that: holding that "the end" can't justify "the means"—Liz, explaining all that to some doubtful Silurians, back when she was still at UNIT, though not for long. She wouldn't separate those concepts either, now; "all we have is means," as the saying goes.

It was complicated, at UNIT, but she didn't regret staying. Leaked some documents when they were doing something *too* unconscionable, but she understood the necessity. Defending the Earth... Well, what she *thought* was necessity.

Acid spreading across the surface of the planet.

Is she the Liz Shaw that would have always chosen to *not*, is the question. Not work with them, quit everything *remotely* close to government work if she had to, to make sure information like that *wasn't there*? PROBE was fine, mostly thanks to Patsy's finagling at the start, but—she had thought UNIT was 'fine' too. That was probably *not a word you apply to secret organisations*! They're never always—

She crumpled into a hug. "I did say I trust you. God, Liz... I don't know of any bioweapons anyone's hiding from me." Her tea was probably cold already. "And don't say that I wouldn't."

AND I FELL INTO A DREAM
(A DAY IN THE LIFE)

by Ash Fall

The day started normally, like all things. Well, *normal* is subjective. To his big sister, *normal* meant the wildest parties and being black-out drunk for decades, the "most thrilling" adventures and "best" stories told by her hand.

Not to him. He doesn't fancy that kind of life.

Sometimes it strikes him how dissimilar they are, even when they'd been *designed* to be similar. Or, well, at least *Hilary'd* been designed.

His sister had been the real thing.

Well, no use going down that line of thought. It took (wasted) an inordinate amount of time and effort, and quite frankly, he has better things to do.

So:

The day started normally.

And by *normally*, Hilary meant *peacefully*. It was quiet, as expected—partygoers don't frequent nightclubs during the daytime, of course. He woke up, rolled out of bed, and soon enough went downstairs to the actual club, where no doubt he would find Roger behind the counter, burning songs onto old-timey CDs (one thing he and his sister both liked) or attempting to mix new drinks to create that day's special.

Or *possibly*, he thought, arriving, and bringing his partner into eyesight, *both*. At the same time.

What *would* have been the natural conclusion of that line of thought, in other, purely terrestrial circumstances, was an *oh no*, or some other exclamatory internal remark to that effect.

Not for he and Roger, no.

Hilary strolled past, smiling at Roger, who somehow had the multitasking abilities (though, multitasking itself is an illusion, because one's brain can only properly *focus* at one task at a time: it's either not doing either properly, or *switching* between the tasks. And in his case, Roger paused both to look up at him,) to smile at him in greeting.

Hilary picked up the glass that looked like it was being experimented in, and sniffed it. And promptly made a disgusted, scrunched-up face, and put it back down again.

"Too strong, I think."

"Oh, no," Roger laughed, turning to face him full-body, "they love it like this."

Hilary, who had never had any sort of alcohol in his life, and was not about to start, just shrugged. "Well, I suppose, if you say so. I wouldn't know."

Roger hummed, and taking that as a signal that the greeting-conversation was over, Hilary strode past.

"Any VIPs coming in today?" he asked over his shoulder, not really expecting an answer.

"Oh, uh, yes," Roger replied, which was quite unexpected for Hilary, "we have a booking for 9 p.m. to 1 a.m."

"Hm. A booking in a nightclub."

Roger shrugged. "Comes with fame, I think."

"Or *in*famy," Hilary replied with a smile. "Either way, are we ready for it?"

"Will be. Soon," he said, and paused, measuring some precise quantity of a fluorescent yellow concoction into the glass, "when the employees come in, give it about... seven hours? They'll do it."

"Seven hours," Hilary mused lightheartedly, "whatever will we do with ourselves till then?"

Roger looked up, and caught his eye, looking a bit confused.

"Ah, no," he backtracked, note which could be read either as alarm or warning in his voice, "I did not mean sex."

"You meant...?"

Hilary (accidentally!) let out a higher-than-usual pitched, nearly-hysterical laugh. “I didn't mean anything, I think,” he stepped away, jittery movements, eyes very slightly wide, “I wasn't thinking. Sorry,” though he wasn't too sorry, really, but just to say something, “nevermind.”

Then, in an impeccable display of calmness, Hilary proceeded to hightail it out of there.

Subtly, of course. And by the time he'd settled down (sitting on his own bed upstairs), he realised that he probably should've dealt with that better. As to not end up like his big sister, always ignoring and running away from things.

Although, it wasn't as if he needed to awkwardly talk about it, or why he reacted in such a manner. It wasn't necessary, not important.

And then again, one could argue that there was nothing wrong with taking the good things in life and... sidestepping the bad.

And in this case, Hilary was *definitely* the “one” above mentioned.

He shrugged on his coat after a moment of further consideration (which, honestly, was just him trying to project an air of thought-out-ness to his actions, more than anything,) and just... walked out.

Not that there *were* many places he could go. He just ended up wandering the streets of Malaga for a good few hours. Which was largely eventful, but it *did* give him some time to think while his legs moved mostly on auto-pilot across well-mapped-out roads and alleyways; swerving in and out of either badly or neon-lit side-ways made only for locals’... activities (regardless of the time. He just ran through those ones, velvet coat flapping dramatically behind him.) and dashing across busy four-way intersections on the main roads. It was, all in all, exhausting physically, but a relief mentally. If you understand.

Hilary made it back in by 2 p.m., and thankfully *did* not see Roger anywhere while he stealthily made his way back to his room. Not that he was *avoiding* him or *hiding from him*, you understand, but it's just so much more convenient *not* to face one's partner after an extensive 5 hour walk around and ‘round one’s city.

Hilary’s luck didn't last long. Regrettably.

Not even an hour after he arrived in his room, took his coat off, and sat down on his bed intending to wallow a touch, Roger knocked.

Now, he *knew* that it was Roger, because there was a specific way he knocked: hesitant to impose or intrude, yet convicted.

He sighed, and got up, and shuffled over, and opened the door.

Roger—looking, as expected, unsure and a bit concerned—made his way into Hilary’s room. Hands out in front of him, as if confronting or comforting some scared newly-rescued animal. It made him just a bit sickening to look at, though he didn’t *mean* bad. Which in turn made Hilary feel even worse.

“Uh,” Roger said, gently closing the door behind him, “you know... you know I don't mind, right?”

Hilary, who had placed himself upon his bed and had begun swinging his legs, nodded. And then he sighed, and keeping his gaze downwards and tracking the oscillation of his legs, said, “yes, well... I do feel bad.”

“What—*why*?”

He swung his legs with increased vigour, staring resolutely at them, as if hoping somehow that the effort he put in there would cause the spontaneous appearance of some perfect answer in his head.

“That... that I can't give you—what you—what you want, need, how will I know?” He laughed a little helplessly.

“Hilary,” Roger said, “you know I don't want it from you, right? I mean, it's alright, really! I don’t—”

“No,” he interrupted, with a vindictive sort of

catharsis at cutting him off, at the fall of his face, at his wide worried eyes, almost immediately feeling bad for feeling it, "I—*oh*, never you mind, actually. It's nothing."

Never *anybody* mind, *actually*, because he isn't going to describe the rest of the conversation; it was, as mentioned before, incredibly awkward and personal and he does not feel comfortable sharing it with just about anybody. So he *won't*.

Whatever you all may think of him, it doesn't matter. The view into his life picks up again at 10 p.m., and that will be all you will get, because everybody ought to remember that *he* is the one whose point of view is being taken into consideration.

So, consider:

By 10, their place (for some reason, Hilary hesitated to call it a *nightclub* outright, probably due to his aversion to such places) had already opened up for the night, and had been in business for the last hour and running.

It was these times that Hilary, not without a twinge of guilty conscience, enjoyed the most. The bustle, the *people*, these were all... not his concern. He got to sit backstage, so to speak, in the soft blue-and-bottle-green glow of some room whose name he had never bothered to learn, whiling away the hours till something inconvenient inevitably occurred; upon which he would usher himself out of the room to run "damage control".

Roger had chosen him for the task due to his capable and soothing presence, although he often required his partner's assistance to reign in and escort out the more unruly, utterly inebriated customers.

It is such an instance that will be presented to you, presently. (And, *no*, Hilary can't come to narrate right now, as he is very tired and expecting something outside of his wants is very unbecoming of you. Yes, I'm the narrator, and yes, I'm working under a very pretty contract, which includes copious amounts of spirits from their esteemed nightclub. Incidentally, do visit. It's very fun here. The atmosphere itself is nothing like any of us have ever seen.) I can assure that no harm befell anybody present, at any given moment. Having said that:

Hilary turned the door knob and let the rush of cool, dry, air-conditioned air (with absence of multiple hot bodies radiating perspiration and alcoholic fumes into the air,) comfort him.

"So," Roger asked, "how is everything? Sorry for not being out there, by the way."—he grimaced out a smile and gestured to... some digital documents which Hilary really did not care to read—"Busy."

He dropped down onto the sofa instead, and smiled back with similar energy and sentiment.

"Those VIPs."

"What about them?"

"They're... well. They've entered with and are carrying a set of bright pink shears."

Roger nodded for him to go on.

"*Exercise caution* is all I'm saying. Center a high-priority security camera on them."

"Also, there's this woman—forties, fifties if she looks younger than she is, humanoid—accompanied by her friend who looks a bit younger. Roger, listen. She's drinking herself to death, I'm serious, and her friend's *trying* to comfort her, she seems sweet and soft-spoken, so it's granted that it's just egging her on."

Roger turned towards him fully, just a bit confused.

"Uh, no offense, 'course, but why do we care about a customer's emotional problems?"

Hilary scoffed. "It's not her *emotional problems*, it's the fact that she is *quite literally about to drink herself to death*. That wasn't a hyperbolic exaggeration!"

He noticed that Roger was listening, intently. That was good, because sometimes he looked as though he was listening, but really wasn't. Which Hilary wouldn't ordinarily fault him for, but he needed Roger to listen properly for once, because he was speaking for *his* benefit.

"I mean, even *entirely ignoring ethics*, a customer dying because of us would—would just be *bad rep*," he managed, Roger's quoted words sitting uneasy and out of place on his tongue.

Hilary paused for breath. "Also," he added, "if I have to hear her ramble about how her son's ears were *adorably pettable back when he was a baby*, I am, for lack of a better phrase, *going to absolutely lose it!*"

Roger laughed, but it died down quick enough, consideration and comprehension seeping through.

"Please," Hilary added. "Escort her out. Her friend seems capable enough to take care of her when she's outside."

"Okay, okay," Roger chuckled, and then got up and walked out of the room, closing the door softly behind him.

"Oh! By the way," he popped in the door again, "has she payed?"

"For her demise?" Hilary answered wryly, "Yes. Probably. It's on her tab. Get that later, alright? Just—"

"Escort her out, yeah," Roger smiled at him, sunnily, which Hilary didn't quite understand. "I'll be right back!"

He left, softly shutting the door behind him. Again. For good this time, hopefully, because they *really* needed to deal with that patron.

Hilary leaned back against the plush cushions, and considered just... drifting off to sleep. The room was *more than* comfortable enough. It was *soft*.

Still, there was work to be done. He knew that he couldn't sleep just yet, however much he would've liked to.

There were accounts to be made, and, more importantly, cameras to be monitored, especially now that Roger had gone for other—but equally as important—business.

They really *should* get to hiring other staff save for bartends: relaxation could be afforded, then; not to Hilary, who took it whenever he fancied it, but to Roger, whose life's work and greatest pride was the... nightclub. Bit strange, really, but he'd take it.

He made a swipe for the palmtop from Roger's desk, and succeeded effortlessly in bringing it to him in one fine movement.

Hilary toyed with the settings—number of camera displays on the screen, grid space, volume; that sort of thing—absentmindedly, waiting for Roger to come back triumphant, half in a haze. He wasn't *really* paying attention.

Maybe he ought to have been, but luckily, nothing occurred that night while his not-so-watchful eye was... not being too watchful, strictly speaking.

He *did* end up drifting off, eventually: the unfocused state of mind he was in lending him a slowly slipping-away consciousness, so slow that he wasn't aware of it, nor could he catch himself, with the growing foggy indistinctness of the already-so-soft surroundings seeming *right*, in a way; and this could, if one tried, be an excuse for him to neglect his sparse duties and go to sleep, but *really*, one in that case could hardly *blame* him for succumbing to the blurriness of the room, the blurriness of the night (like all nights), the invitingly plush sofa and cushions so comfortable that *anybody*, no, *everybody* with any sense would have. Fallen asleep. Taken themselves to the land of half-conscious thoughts drifting about that would all disappear later, regardless of any attempt to hold on to them.

Well. Before his thoughts scatter too much to be legible, to be captured in print or paper or scans; before he loses the last grip on reality, before his head stops bothering to register the cushion tucked under his neck or behind his back, the palmtop having slipped onto the seat; before he starts thinking of things he has no context nor reason to be thinking about, unexplainables he'd never be able to reach anytime else... he can faintly hear Roger walking up to the door, now. It's possibly the last thing he registers, before he indulges himself like he always does, lets go of shared responsibility, and makes it entirely his.

THE CHANCE OF A LIFETIME

by Raine Lyall

A lone, wispy cloud sailed across a sea of stars. It brought with it a cool desert breeze. Below, huddled with flickering streetlamps and darkening shadows, a tavern glowed and hummed with activity. For just a moment, that light and noise burst its bubble and spilled onto the street, and the person now known as Caroline Saint stepped outside.

She took a deep breath, revelling in the fresh air. Then to contrast it, she lit the end of a slender cigarette holder. She sat on the short roadside fence. A selfish moment alone.

It was during her third smoky breath that she realised she wasn't actually alone.

Standing against the tavern wall, only barely catching the light from the windows, was a man. His dark cloak shifted in the breeze. Serious lines were furrowed into his face, and his piercing eyes were focused entirely on Saint.

She couldn't help herself, she laughed. "You look ridiculous, my dear."

This only deepened the man's frown. "Just what do you think you're doing?" he hissed.

"It's called a birthday party," Saint said. "*My* birthday party, in fact. You should try it. I can't imagine you enjoying it, but you never know."

"You know what I'm talking about! Or am I to believe that you *accidentally* achieved a position of power in this community?"

His frantic energy rather undercut his attempts at sounding foreboding. She, on the other hand, giggled again.

"Position of power? I'm barely invited to the meetings. Only *you* could believe that a minor seat on the local council has the power to blow up the universe."

"Thanks to you, a minor seat on the local council now has exactly that power."

She snorted as a way of brushing that off. Readjusted herself on the fence. "You're becoming paranoid."

"You're becoming *involved*," he said, throwing the word at her like an accusation in a courtroom.

Before she could reply, or possibly laugh again, the tavern spilled more light and noise.

"Caroline?" said someone from the doorway, "Are you coming in? There's cake."

She stood up. "Yes, I'm coming."

The desert breeze came again, and this time it brought a whisper, a thought, one that Saint wasn't surprised by. "I'll be watching."

"Is someone there?" asked her friend.

"No, darling, just me," said Saint, because the person now known as the Minister wasn't anywhere in sight.

The young woman named Kitty returned the stare of a lizard, and scowled. She held her bowl of bready things closer against her chest. The lizard's tongue briefly darted out and in again.

Behind Kitty, strange trees grew out of a strange park. Above the trees rose towering steeples and spires, and above the spires the sky shone a dark purple. In front of Kitty, a marketplace burbled and bustled, including the baker who'd sold her the bready things ...and warned her of the local stray lizards. There was also an empty bowl on the cobblestone, surrounded by three more dog-sized lizards licking it clean.

A man in a dark cloak stepped around the reptiles. "Oh dear, I see you had an accident with your food," said the Minister.

"Had an accident with *your* food," specified Kitty. "By which I mean I was *robbed*."

"Robbed at tongue-point, how thrilling," he said with his characteristic lack of thrill.

"I couldn't fend them off any longer! You shouldn't have taken so bloody long."

The Minister stood beside where she was sitting. He wasn't exactly smiling, but he had the intensely annoying quality of radiating amusement anyway. Smug, that was the word. Smug git, if you wanted two.

Obviously the lizard keeping watch was put off by him as well, because it turned to shamble away.

"I've been gathering information from local sources," the Minister said. "Learning the lie of the land."

The Minister had taken Kitty to visit several faraway lands now, whenever she wasn't too busy with university classes. Purportedly to broaden her horizons. And it had done so, truth be told. Kitty had seen cities and scenery more varied and vivid than she could have possibly imagined.

Everywhere they went the Minister would answer all (well, most) of Kitty's questions, and sometimes he'd encourage her to observe the cultures they visited. Make deductions, spot patterns. Somehow, it made Kitty wonder how long he thought she'd be doing this with him. Or even what *this* was, exactly.

"You mean you listened to local gossip," said Kitty. "So did I." She revised her mental checklist. "There was a lot about import prices. Oh, and military presence." She started on another one of her bready things.

The Minister hummed, though whether in agreement or in judgement it was hard to tell. "When someone starts a fire, do not look into the flames, but for the person holding the match."

"Why d'you do that?" Kitty complained whilst chewing. "How many of those you got?!"

"How many of *what* I got?"

Kitty swallowed. "*Sayings*. Y'know, like what fortune tellers say when they pretend to read your future."

The Minister bristled. "I do *not*—"

"If you're asking why about the imports and stuff, just say so."

"I was illustrating—"

"*And* I know the why already. It's because the Vermillion Kingdoms overthrew their dictatorship."

The Minister actually looked taken aback at that. She enjoyed the boggle-eyed reaction. "Have they? How do *you* know that?"

"*Everyone's* talking about it. It basically happened overnight. Hadn't you heard?"

"No..." The Minister stared into space.

"You know what your problem is?" said Kitty. "Your problem is that you *listen*, but you don't *hear*." She nodded in her best wise-old-man impression. "Yeah, you talk *at*, but don't talk *to*. How's that for a saying?"

"Please. Give me a moment."

The Minister was suddenly acting quiet and antisocial, rather than his usual loud and antisocial. Kitty felt her heart sink. She'd only seen him act this way when he was genuinely worried. And when something genuinely worried him, it was usually something apocalyptic.

He sighed. "I know someone in the Vermillion Kingdoms. I haven't seen her in quite a long time. But if the dictatorship's crumbled... I have to see her. I have to make certain she keeps her head. That she hasn't done anything... ill-advised."

Kitty had the worrying feeling that she knew what he was talking about. "Is your friend... I mean, is she..."

"I didn't actually say she was my friend."

"But is she... one of you?"

The Minister's face was grave. "Yes."

Kitty had no word for what the Minister was. She had heard him called a wizard, a spirit, a god. But she knew he wasn't any of those things.

She didn't know where he was from, maybe it didn't matter, but she knew it was somewhere far away and knowledgeable. Further away and far more knowledgeable than any place Kitty had ever dreamt of. And with that knowledge, he had the power to control the very building blocks of the world. She'd seen him create objects using only thin air, change states of matter, sometimes even make lightning strike on a whim.

She had met others like him, most of them living solitary, hermit-like lives. They were united only by their devotion to a cardinal rule: not to use their gifts to influence the lives of others, to strike a delicate balance with the world.

When Kitty had met the Minister, he'd been hunting one of his lot who had believed himself above any rules, and was more than happy to use his power for his own benefit. The results of those selfish actions had been nightmarish. The thought of meeting someone similar was deeply concerning. The exact wording that Kitty used to express this was "Shit."

And yet, Kitty convinced the Minister to take her with him. He made an effort to dissuade her, but either he'd grown used to her company or she'd got to know what arguments worked on him. So she watched quietly as the Minister found an empty path in the park, and got to work creating a door.

He murmured under his breath, dictating how the atoms and molecules should go about rearranging themselves. Kitty murmured some of it with him. She stopped sometimes, when she got the formula wrong, but eventually started back up again. If he noticed, he didn't show any sign.

He hadn't offered to teach Kitty how to do anything like what he did. She wasn't even sure if she could. But she knew that his powers weren't entirely his own, either. Some of it was contained in a necklace that he kept safely hidden away somewhere under those thick robes. When he had told her about it, it was as if he was parting with his greatest secret. She hadn't told anybody else.

Eventually, the door was ready, standing freely amidst dirt and foliage. Without another word, Kitty followed the Minister through it, and onto the Frost Bridge Between Worlds.

Crystal ice sparkled almost as much as the infinite starry space all around them, their footsteps echoed strangely in the empty air, and Kitty knew without looking back that the door would fade and vanish behind them.

The Minister also kept facing forward. Kitty could see the way his gait had stiffened, and how his speed betrayed his worries. He was steeling himself for... hopefully a confrontation, rather than a fight. As the Bridge's curve brought them to another doorway, Kitty steeled herself too.

It was quite an anti-climax when they discovered that Caroline Saint had died several months ago.

"He's gone now." The woman named Reba squinted through the window, into the morning sunlight. "I swear, he was looking right at the apartment."

Despite the ominous observation, Caroline Saint hadn't moved from her dining table. It doubled as her desk when she couldn't be bothered to move stacks of documents and folders to her actual desk. She thumbed through some of them as she said "Let me guess. Swaddled in some sort of ghastly cloak?"

"Do you know him? Do you have some kind of stalker?"

"Worse," Saint stopped thumbing. "He's...

well, I suppose he's the closest thing I have to family."

Reba abandoned the window entirely at that. Every time she'd asked about her friend's life prior to moving to town, the conversation had been skillfully redirected. Reba noticed, but she didn't mind. She wasn't the kind of person to pry. But that didn't mean she couldn't be curious.

"Does he want to come in and say hello?" He sure hadn't looked like it.

"That's not his sordid style. He's just checking up on me. Or ensuring that I know he's checking up on me. Or however his convoluted little neurosis likes to think of it. You see, he doesn't approve."

"Of what?"

"Of my decision to move here, my career path, my relationships..." Saint gave a theatrical sigh. "He doesn't approve of relationships in general. He's lonely and he likes it that way. Frankly, sweetheart, I just give him what he wants by ignoring him until he goes away."

"No love lost there then."

"I won't give him the satisfaction of distracting me. Not today of all days, when I'm desperate to be distracted. What is all this in aid of again, my dear?" Saint asked that as if she wasn't the one who had personally picked out every paper to be lugged back to her apartment.

"Fighting the State Courts' latest restrictions on inter-territory trade," Reba answered professionally.

"Ah yes. We have a long day ahead of us if we want to see another trading caravan."

On the outskirts of town, between the rusty edge of the suburbs and the seemingly endless scrub-marked sands of the desert, messy rows of man-sized stones stood out like layers of jagged teeth. Several of them had small, unobtrusive black plaques attached to them. One of those plaques read:

HERE STOOD CAROLINE SAINT
LEADER, FRIEND, INSPIRATION

The Minister had his head bowed as he stood in front of the stone, and he spoke to it quietly.

Kitty had never seen him look quite so sad as when he found out. She dearly wished to know what secrets or unfinished business he was giving to the stone, but she held back along with the local who'd led them there. They were no older than Kitty herself, still growing into their short-trimmed beard. Apparently they'd been the assistant or secretary or something to the woman—to Miss Saint.

"Did you, uh, know her well?" Kitty asked the secretary awkwardly.

"Well enough," they said. "I mean, a bit. We got on well, and she taught me a lot. That's what matters, right?"

"S'pose." Kitty shuffled her feet. "So... how exactly did she die?"

"A heart attack I think. She wasn't young." They glanced at the Minister. "Your friend didn't seem happy when I told him."

"I don't think he's had many friends go like that."

"Well... I guess we all get to that stage of life eventually."

"Yeah," Kitty said, trying to sound convincing.

Apparently Saint had been cremated. Most locals were given sky burials amongst the nearest mountains, but Saint's ashes had been scattered there instead. "I think she wanted a sky burial," said her former secretary with a curious tone, "but she said that cremation was traditional where she came from, or something like that. Though she insisted on a standing stone. I told your friend, but I couldn't tell if he approved or not."

Kitty didn't have much to say to that. So they stood in silence, watching the stones that made up a graveyard that followed the edge of town. Protruding out of the sand like the ribs of a great buried skeleton. Or a great decayed sailing ship. Eventually, Kitty thanked the secretary, and the two of them drifted apart.

As she approached the Minister, she heard that he was still talking. She didn't *try* to eavesdrop, but she didn't try *not* to eavesdrop. What was he taking so long to say, anyway?

Then she was close enough to make him out, and what she heard was "...molecule molecule bond, atom bond molecule, wave wave atom..."

Oh. She huffed in disbelief. "I thought you were praying or something!"

The Minister raised his eyebrows at her, and said with finality "Atom atom bond."

Kitty held her tongue from asking any questions or throwing any biting remarks. As she watched, the Minister reached a hand out and into the stone, slipping into it like it was an optical illusion. When he withdrew it, he held in his hand a small silver chain with an inoffensive-looking charm attached. It was a bracelet.

Kitty guessed what it really was, of course. She remembered the Minister's hidden necklace.

"I just had to make sure there wasn't anything else in the stone," he said, voice still lowered.

"Like treasure?"

"Like *traps*. Here," he handed her the jewellery. She wasn't prepared for that, and he gave her a look when she fumbled with it. "If it is even slightly within your capability, *be careful*. Best that I don't hold on to it, if it can be avoided."

Kitty slipped the bracelet around her wrist. Then shoved the hand into her pocket. To be careful. "What now?"

"Now, I... I'd like to see what else she left behind. Maybe I'll find out why..." He trailed off. He looked back at the monolith and sighed, suddenly weary. "This shouldn't have happened. There's so few of us left."

Kitty wanted to... hug him or something. Instead she just stood closer, until their arms bumped.

After a moment, the weariness was buried again. "I'm going to tidy up any loose ends," he said. Kitty stifled a yawn, and he continued as if it was part of the original thought "and you're going to book yourself into the local lodging establishment. You need sleep."

"I don't," she mangled while still yawning.

"You're only human," said the Minister.

The floor creaked as the Minister stepped into Caroline Saint's apartment. Dust danced in the air. A few pages remained in small piles on the dining table. Muffled movement next door was the only thing that encroached on the quiet. Only one of the windows had its curtains open, and sitting on the sill, wearing prim black clothes under the dazzling afternoon clouds, was Saint herself.

Neither would know it for quite some time, but this would be their final meeting.

"My my," said Saint. She lacked the usual energy that she put into acting effortless. "Today of all days. If you're here for the funeral, then you missed it. But you're not one for social gatherings, if I recall."

"I... I just came to see how you were doing," the Minister lied. "Then I heard what happened."

"How I'm doing," she scoffed. "You want to lure me away from this life, I suppose, like a sanctimonious second-hand grim reaper."

"No," he said genuinely. "I want to say that I'm sorry for your loss."

Saint didn't respond to that. It simply hadn't occurred to her that condolences would be offered.

The Minister risked standing a little closer. He let some of the sunlight warm his toes. Saint said "It's strange. I still thought of Reba as my closest confidante. But we hadn't talked in years. She moved to Aripolis because she thought she could do more there. She thought she could address all those injustices at the source. Fight the power. Change the world. She wanted me to come with her." And she looked at the Minister like she blamed him. Perhaps she did. Perhaps she just wished she did. "I stayed here."

"I... Perhaps I should go," the Minister said. He stepped back out of the sunlight.

There was a small stone on the dining room table, engraved with Reba's name, and carved to be a replica of the larger one at the town's edge. The Minister looked down at it, at all that remained of a person. The end of a life. Just half an hour ago he'd held a baby in his arms as she made a snotty mess on his cloak. That was the first life he'd saved in quite some time. He'd come here to talk to a friend about that.

Maybe next time. The floor creaked again on his way out.

It had taken Caroline Saint a while to realise that she was growing old. But the evidence was there, and she was never so crass as to ignore evidence.

She needed to sit far more than she used to. But as she sat more, she found a new appreciation for sitting. One of her favourite sitting spots was on a bench at the graveyard, where the standing stones would paint long pointed shadows in the evening. It was there that she could watch the dust clouds of the new desert trains dipping in and out of sight. And it was there that the girl with white hair found her.

Saint hadn't seen her approach. In a single moment she was simply there, standing beside her. The girl looked more surprised about this than Saint did.

"Are you... Caroline Saint?" the girl said.

"I suppose I must be, by now." Saint peered up at her. "You're not who I was expecting."

"Oh."

"But I can tell you know him."

"...I'm friends with the Minister, if that's who you mean? I'm Kitty."

"Well, Kitty, this bench isn't just for decoration you know."

Kitty sat down beside Saint.

"I wasn't really... I mean I didn't think I'd meet you... I mean I did think I'd meet you but then it turned out... um..."

"Ah," Saint said. She had something of a grasp on what was going on. "That's a lovely bracelet you're wearing."

Kitty looked down, then back up. "The bracelet! Does that mean... What does that mean?"

Saint smiled at her. "It means you're very close to me now. The past and the future may be separate, but they're never entirely unconnected. They each rely on the other."

"Oh. Should I... go get the Minister?"

"I doubt you'll have the chance, darling. I imagine this is more of a one-time thing. Maybe it wouldn't work with him anyway."

"Oh." Kitty said again. "...I feel like it should be him here, not me."

"But it isn't."

"That's... shit."

"That's life," said Saint fondly.

Together, they watched the sunset.

"...I think I know what he'd ask you. About why you chose to... settle down." Kitty said.

"Oh yes?"

"Yeah. But I think there's some pretty obvious answers to that."

Saint laughed. "Then you're wiser than him. Which isn't always a terribly high bar, mind you."

"What I want to know is... do you regret it?"

"Oh Kitty," said Saint, "I regret so much. I'd do so many things differently." She looked at the landscape, and at the stones that broke it up. "But I'd do them differently here."

"Good. Yeah. Good."

When Saint looked at Kitty, it was like she looked right into her. Maybe she could do just that. "You don't have to take his path, you know."

"I know. But... well, I'm not sure he's even on a path."

"I'm glad he's got you, Kitty." She turned her gaze to the horizon. "Life is a shoreline. Balanced between the solid land and the murky ocean. We all walk the causeway, every single one of us. I may be floating out to open water, dissipating, but you've got a long way still to walk."

"You're starting to sound like him."

"Well in that case darling, perhaps you could hurry things along by killing me here and now."

Kitty laughed. And when the laughing stopped, Saint realised that she was the only one sitting on the bench.

The sun was almost entirely gone now. Another night had come, and a sea of stars was starting to shine.

DEAR READERS,

Art Critic extraordinaire, of esoteric renown in the few circles with a smidgen of taste left, Panda here. I was requested, humbly, to read through and write up an afterword for this fan-magazine. I was simply *delighted* at their lengthy request, citing my [great] reviews and showering me with well-deserved praise, which convinced me thoroughly to take it on.

The mysterious organizer of this little project, along with my wilfully-assigned contact—with a story of their own, though it wasn't offered up for me, the spineless coward—have, for some incomprehensible reason, restricted me to only the four stories below. What reason they could have, for enlisting my talents yet only offering a meagre display, I have no clue.

So, we begin with... *How Time Has Ticked A Heaven Round The Stars*.

Well, how *has* time *ticked a heaven 'round the stars?* What does it *mean* to do so? Neither of these questions are answered, or even acknowledged in the prose. It remains one of those titles distanced from the story, adding nothing to it.

It's all very abstract, and well enough if you like that sort of thing, I suppose; but I've never held much regard for the types who extract imaginary meaning out of nothingness or obfuscation. Amidst the swirling waves of 'time' and the deliberately confusing phrasings of the dreaming world, any hope of conveying any meaning is taken, thoroughly and painfully crushed, set fire to, and tossed in the bin for good measure.

And, of course, like all fiction which serves only to irritate me, it ends with the reveal of *it all being a dream*... but I suppose it's a good enough reason as any for the nonsense it contains. At least it *was* all a dream: otherwise, there would be no justification for the *unbearably* abstract states of mind of the protagonist, hoping to convey some world-weary tiredness or the other, or depression, or memories of a lost love, all muddled in a huge mess.

Next, *The Solar Package*: apparently, as per the title, *A Roz Forrester Story*. Which would, without a doubt, hold infinite appeal to those who wish to acquaint themselves with the woman, and indolently flick by story titles till they get there. I don't think I need to mention how distasteful I find this practice: as if anybody in their right mind would make it so *easy!* In fact, I think all authors should write the most *misleading* titles, as to lead these people astray.

Either way, the story itself is much more pleasant than the last. Coherence, at least, and at last, is afforded; and through the story a portrait of the main character can be crafted. I commend whatever authorial skill compelled the mapping-out of this woman's life in such a manner that leaves the intelligent informed, and the [idiots] repulsed. As for me, I've always felt a fascination for the *unlikable* people... probably why I stick around Iris, for one.

The way it ends—somewhat like the previous one, actually—makes it so that the *events* of the story have no lasting impact. It's quite strange, and while the previous story is *improved* by it, this one is rather *not*.

Next, *Duplicity in Multiplicity.* For *once*, the title pleases me. It has a certain phonetical quality to it... it's been a while since I've seen a well-made title.

The story follows a creature from a world where those fucking nuisances calling themselves *Lords,* who've made it their goal to plague the entire universe until it commits suicide save them, appear, and in true Lord Temporal fashion—unfailingly unpleasant, for our information—start colonizing the creature's planet and terraforming it to be similar to theirs. Those suffocatingly dull imbeciles can't stand anything different and therefore *better* than them, or so I'm told.

The 'plot' after this, however, completely lost me. The unfortunate soul with what seems like soldier-boy *replicas* all over the place to do the Lords' bidding, seems to be an unnecessarily convoluted way of showing the effect they have on all life: entanglement whether one likes it or not, and the inability to escape their sickening control over all.

The ending, similarly, would've been better if the creature themselves *could not have escaped.* It's unrealistic, that's what. The only reason Iris —and I—manage to escape is due to her being, in part, one of them; and also due to her bus' casual universe-skipping business.

Next, the *Report of Dr. John H. Holmes Regarding The Red-Handed League*. In accuracy to Doyle's original style of Watson—now Holmes—writing about Holmes, it's accurate enough: from the gushing over Holmes' brilliance to the open-mouthed amazement, as if he hadn't known him for years and was discovering his skill anew, each time. Or perhaps, as people who have known each other for long, continued affection borne from disbelief that one could ever *know* such a brilliant man. That is Watson and Holmes. Though, through Watson, Doyle had also hoped to have expressed a comprehensive view of *Holmes*: his brilliance, his eccentricities, et cetera. The image of Holmes which was meant to be perceived by—and which has subsequently become *stuck in*—readers' minds. All that said, though, I don't necessarily mind the queer reading of Holmes novels. In fact, I support it, but we cannot completely disregard the former: the very probable intention of the author. That would be ridiculous.

In *this* story, all subtlety has *flown* out of the window of its own accord, before the story even *began.* Instead of tasteful subtext, there's overt displays of affection; instead of the Victorian era, there's the vast land of the Future: where anything and everything is possible, where absurdist science-fiction writers revel in residing.

That, certainly, it is. And a damn good show of it, too. *Fan fiction* giving them existence, and Watson's—sorry, *Holmes*'—genuine gratefulness towards it, is just fucking hilarious. That's a phrase which describes the story well. *Fucking hilarious*, all of it, from the sea of Poirots, variously first-named Holmeses and assistants, to the enmity between groups desperate to get their hands on a good case, and the hilariously stereotypical attitude of the Red-Handed League (named such, because that's the one thing they *won't* be caught being. Hilarious.) The stroke-of-genius cab ride when all others were involved in a foot-race was a testament to *this* Holmes' thinking. No doubt that *other* Holmeses would've done the same, with their respective Watson-equivalents waxing of their greatness alongside.

It reminds me of a time Iris and I had encountered—and subsequently solved the mystery of—variants of such detectives: Marple, Poirot, Holmes, and less significant others, dropping dead one-by-one, of some malicious plot against them.

All that said, it's an interesting project to experience. Unfortunately, I couldn't get my hands on the art pieces... they were too scared to let me near them. And, just think, what a show I could've made of them! But I suppose I should be content with what I got, or some similar rubbish..

Panda.

[dictated to *Ash Fall*]

THANK YOU

WRITERS

ASH FALL
xXx3rroRxXx

COLE MARTIN

JENNIFER STILL

JONI SMITH proofreading

LOUIS PEACOCK proofreading

MOLLY WARTON
mollywarton.net

PETERCHU proofreading
peterchu
peterchu42

RAINE LYALL
being-of-rain
ThisNothingInTheMiddle

SIR CAROLYN proofreading
sircarolyn

TARA LITHOPS
partiallithopseffect
taraoftraken

LAURELINE LECHAT mod, proofreading

AND OTHER HELPING HANDS

DANTE STARSHIPTROOPER proofreading
big_lizard.png

DELILAH proofreading

OWEN RUBEN mod

MICHELLE J PETERSEN proofreading

ARTISTS

ARISTIDE TWAIN writer
aristidetwain
aristidetwain.neocities.org

BING
1vdt2

BONEWORMS writer

DRAGO
eriktheshitmusician

FIEFIE
crepeandtoast

GALE HEIMELDAT writer
heimeldat

HONEYDONT
honey-dont

Special extra huge thanks to
IVQKS159
breadbug159
ivqks159
as a mod and my zine mentor

JOHANNA LANGENHAN
dead.garden
head mod, layout, basically that's me :^)

JOHANNES C.
johannesviii

MANGKONG
mkk-ong

MATT JORDAN writer
intuitive-revelations

QI

THANK YOU

. . . THE READERS!

Alas, the zine is at an end.
What shall one to with all that time?

Why not share it with a friend
or post about the zine online?

All works contained within this fanzine are the copyright of their respective creators and have been published here with their permission.

The zine is a loving homage to copyrighted material by the BBC, Big Finish Productions, Virgin Publishing, BBV Productions and others, as well as to the stories of hundreds of individual authors that luckily still hold the copyright to their own works; making the list of people to mention here way too long.

The zine is set in the fonts **Fraunces** (body text) and Industria Pro Solid (headlines).

ELDRITCH DIMENSIONALITY

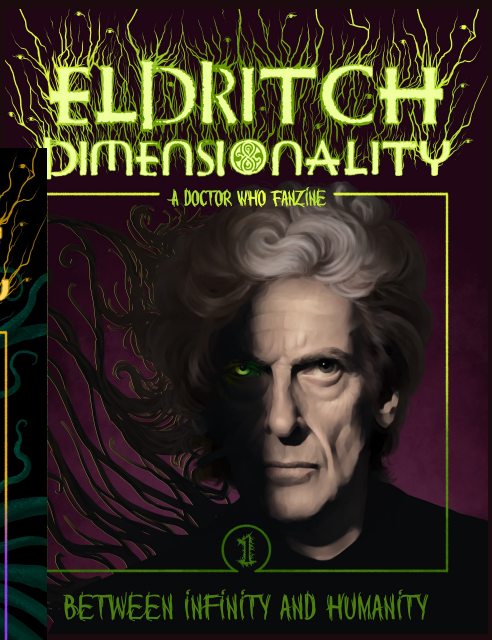
A DOCTOR WHO FANZINE

You're attracted to the strange and bizarre nature of higher dimensions? You love to explore the horror aspects of this universe and the creatures that occupy it? Then this is just the zine for you!

Eldritch Dimensionality is an ongoing zine with individual issues focusing on different "eldritch" concepts in relation to Doctor Who.

t eldritchdimentionality

ISSUES RELEASED THUS FAR



art by **GALE HEIMELDAT**, *see Thank You page for socials*

22
Putney
Thanks 4
reading
#22